ESV

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

STUDY BIBLE

Theology Rooted in the Word of God

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Apologetics

The Term Apologetics

The term apologetics has nothing to do with “apologizing” for anything. Typically we think of an apology as an admission of wrongdoing and a request for forgiveness. But presenting an apologetic is almost the very reverse of apologizing. An apologetic is rather a defense of what might appear to be wrong but actually is right. Rather than requesting forgiveness, an apologetic seeks to persuade someone that no forgiveness is needed, despite a wrongful accusation.

The term apologetics is related to the biblical word group apologeomai, apologia, usually translated “defend, defense.” In the NT, the term is used most often by the apostle Paul, when he defends himself against charges brought against him (Acts 22:1; 24:10; 25:8, 16; 26:1–2, 24). To defend himself against these charges, Paul defends the gospel, the good news about Jesus, which is his overall calling, the context of everything he does. Defending his preaching means defending the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why in Philippians 1:7 Paul speaks of his whole apostolic ministry as “the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” It is that defense of the gospel that has landed him in prison (Phil. 1:16).

The Biblical Mandate for Apologetics

Peter generalizes to all believers the obligation to defend the gospel whenever nonbelievers question our faith:

> In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense [apologia] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. (1 Pet. 3:15)

This is the biblical mandate for apologetics. Peter says that all believers should be prepared to make a defense. We should note that he places this in two contexts: the context of Christ’s lordship and the context of the inquirer. The first context tells us that apologetics is an act of worship, not just a human conversation but a way of honoring Jesus as Lord. When we get into a discussion of the gospel with an unbeliever, we are often tempted to set Christ aside and focus on the common ground of reason and evidence. But we must never set Christ aside. Even in apologetics, our first responsibility is to please him.

The second context is also important. We are to defend the faith “with gentleness and respect.” Some Christians are attracted to the work of apologetics out of a desire to win a contest. Their purpose is to defeat

unbelievers, to devastate them. God, however, calls us to respect them, to convince them gently, and therefore to love them, as Christ first loved us. In apologetics, we are called to image our Lord, not just to talk about him.

In the light of Peter's mandate, we can define apologetics as the defense of the faith. As a theological science, it is the discipline by which we learn to give reasons for our hope, always honoring Christ and showing love for inquirers.

As such, apologetics is found throughout the Bible, not just in the relatively few passages that use apologeomai and its derivatives. Think of how often Jesus reasons with his Jewish opponents. The prophets and apostles regularly do the same, emulating him. Indeed, God himself reasons with those who question him: "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord" (Isa. 1:18).

So the whole content of the Bible is apologetic, for all Scripture is the speech of God, and throughout the Bible God speaks apologetically: he engages in a rational attempt to change the beliefs and behavior of his readers (2 Tim. 3:16–17). And, in all biblical apologetics, God honors his Son as holy and shows gentleness and respect to his readers.

As we seek to learn, then, the art and science of apologetics, the whole Bible will be our text. We shall try to follow the example, not only of Jesus and Paul as they deal with controversy, but of every part of Scripture as it defends its gospel message.

Scripture's Approach to Apologetics

The Bible's own apologetic approach can be conveniently divided into three aspects: (1) setting forth the truth with its rationale, (2) giving direct answers to objections, and (3) showing the foolishness of competing messages. We can distinguish these for convenience, but none of them is complete without the other two.

Setting Forth the Truth

The first of these is by far the most common, in which the Bible in various ways describes its message. What makes this description apologetic is that since the Bible is God's Word, it always sets forth its message clearly and rationally. The story is believable to those who read it with open minds and hearts. But many readers are not open to what it says. That is part of the story too. Paul in Romans 1:18 tells us that many people "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." So we learn that

when people hear the gospel, some reject it, even laugh at it (Acts 17:32). But others find themselves believing it, by a supernatural power (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13).

Try this experiment: When Exodus 14:21 tells us that God divided the Red Sea so that Israel could cross through it, do you find that believable? Some people do. They believe in God, and this event, large as it is, easily seems to be the kind of thing God could do. But others find this account unbelievable, because such things "just don't happen." This second kind of reader may believe that God's existence is possible, but he does not allow God to determine what is possible and what is not. Rather, he determines what is possible by making some assessment of "natural laws" or "rational probabilities." In effect he says, "I will not allow God to determine what is possible; I must do that for myself." But to take that position is already to take the position of unbelief. And if this passage is true, the unbelieving reader suppresses that truth.

Answering Objections

But there are places where Scripture actually addresses skeptics of this kind, and that leads us to the second aspect of the Bible's apologetic: its direct answers to objections. Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, is filled with objections to his gospel: "What advantage has the Jew?" (Rom. 3:1); "What if some were unfaithful?" (Rom. 3:3); "Is [God] unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?" (Rom. 3:5); "Why not do evil that good may come?" (Rom. 3:8); "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). The whole letter to the Romans is a dialogue between Paul and various objectors. In Romans 9: 19–25 he confronts the problem of evil: Should we not charge God himself with evil, since he is himself the source of human disbelief?

> 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 honorable 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? As indeed he says in Hosea,

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

As with Exodus 14:21, some will find this answer credible, while others will not. Some readers will say, “Yes, of course! God has full rights over us, for he is God.” Others, however, will say, “No! God must measure up to my standards of fairness, even when he judges sin and righteousness.” The Christian apologist who enters this discussion will certainly go into much more argumentative detail than Romans 9 provides. But Scripture itself sets forth the basic direction the dialogue will take.

Challenging Competing Messages

This discussion leads us to consider the third of Scripture’s approaches to apologetics: showing the foolishness of competing messages. The Bible does not regard the various forms of unbelief merely as competing worldviews. Rather, it says in Psalm 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” In this verse, atheism is not merely a theoretical position. It determines the atheist’s life choices: “They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.”

So atheism is the whole direction of their lives. That whole complex of beliefs, decisions, and feelings has to change. It is all foolishness.

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (1 Cor. 1:18–21)

The end of the apologetic discussion will not come through compromise. It will not be a mixture of conclusions from two positions. Rather, for the unbelieving position, it will be utter defeat. For God regards it as foolishness, however wise it may appear to the world’s opinion makers. Only a gospel worldview, in the end, will prove rational.

This is the biblical apologetic. The Christian today must follow in its footsteps. Jesus has called us to bring the gospel to people all over the world (Matt. 28:18–20). He has warned us that his gospel will bring

opposition (Matt. 10:34–36). In apologetics we seek to overcome that opposition, insofar as God enables us to do so by words. Apologetics is spiritual warfare.

So the apologist's responsibility is to (1) set forth the biblical story rationally and persuasively, (2) answer the objections inquirers will raise against the truth of this story, and (3) challenge the worldview from which those objections come. In all aspects of our discussion we must keep in mind the antithesis between the two worldviews and the need to avoid compromise. But we must also keep in mind that we are sharing good news with precious human beings in God's image. We should treat them as we would like them to treat us—with gentleness and respect.

It is sometimes difficult to maintain a soldier's discipline while speaking with gentleness and respect. Some apologists are known for their arrogance and meanness as they try to be as militant as possible. Others take on a style of being so meek and nice that they fail to draw sharply enough the antithesis between belief and unbelief. Both types of apologists need to remind themselves of Jesus, who brought a message of love while making clear how radical that love was. That love was the love that entered the world of sin and hatred and changed people in their very hearts. That love was the love by which Jesus died for the sins of his people, was raised, and then began in them a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) that one day will fill the heavens and the earth (Rev. 21:1). There can be no greater love than this, and there can be no sharper antithesis than that between this love and the worldview that would reduce this love to matter, motion, and chance.

A Brief History of Doctrine

Doctrine is Christian belief. Sound doctrine, or orthodoxy, reflects in summary form what Scripture affirms and what the church is bound to believe, in contrast to heresy, which contradicts it. From its beginning, the church has constructed and lived out sound doctrine while opposing heresy. Indeed, in one sense, the history of the church is the history of its doctrine, now told in brief.

The Early Church

The church is commanded to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It obeys this order by receiving "the faith" from its Lord through Scripture, formulating its doctrines, and contending against heresies. The apostolic fathers—Christian leaders after the period of the apostles—wrote letters and composed manuals to encourage, correct, and guide the churches. The apologists, intellectually skilled protectors of Christianity, defended the faith against accusations and misunderstandings that were afoot. An early example of doctrinal formulation was the "rule of faith" or "canon of truth," a digest of beliefs about the Father as almighty Creator, the Son as incarnate Savior, and the Holy Spirit as Revealer of gospel truths.

As the church expanded and confronted challenges to its emerging beliefs, its leaders convened general councils to articulate those doctrines more robustly. The first councils affirmed (1) the eternal reality of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; (2) the deity of the Son against Arianism, which taught that he was a created being, not eternal, and of a different essence than the Father; (3) the full humanity of the Son in the incarnation against Apollinarianism, which held that he took on only a body but not a soul; (4) the deity of the Holy Spirit against the Pneumatomachi ("Spirit-fighters"), who denied his personhood and equality with the Father and the Son; and (5) the hypostatic union, the joining together of two natures—one fully divine, one fully human—in the one person, Jesus Christ, thereby opposing Nestorianism, which denied the union of these two natures, and Eutychianism, which believed that the two natures fused into one nature in the incarnation. These councils composed creeds (e.g., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed) that set forth these orthodox doctrines and condemned departures from them.

The early church based these emerging beliefs on divine revelation,

which came in two forms: (1) general revelation, through creation, the human conscience, God's providential care, and an innate sense of God; and (2) special revelation, through direct speech, historical events, dreams and visions, Jesus Christ, and Scripture. Regarding this last mode of revelation, the church held a very high view of Scripture's inspiration, truthfulness, authority, sufficiency, necessity, clarity, and power. It also gradually recognized through the Holy Spirit that in addition to the Old Testament (the 39 writings inherited from the Jews), its canon, or list of books belonging to Scripture, should include the 27 writings of the New Testament. This canon was eventually expanded to include the Apocrypha, seven other writings and additional sections of Esther and Daniel (though these apocryphal writings were not officially proclaimed as canonical for the Catholic Church until the Council of Trent in 1546; Protestants exclude these books from their canon).

The early church believed God created the heavens and the earth in six days in the not too distant past. At the apex of this creative work were human beings made in the image of God, variously understood to refer to human rationality, free will, moral consciousness, representative role, differentiation from animals, and relationship to God. Creation in the divine image confers dignity and significance upon people. Tragically, the parents of humanity, Adam and Eve, sinned horribly, thereby plunging the entire race into sin. Specifically, the church developed the doctrine of original sin: all people are born with (1) the liability to suffer death and eternal condemnation because of their solidarity with the guilt of Adam and (2) corruption because of the sinful nature received from Adam and Eve. This doctrine was articulated by Augustine and stood in opposition to Pelagianism, which denied any relationship between Adam's sin and the human race, and semi-Pelagianism, which denied the inheritance of guilt from Adam and the complete corruption of human nature.

The solution to the disaster of sin was Christ and his atoning sacrifice. This atonement was understood according to various models in the early church, including: (1) the recapitulation model: the life of Jesus summed up all the life-stages and events of sinful humanity, with Jesus' obedience reversing Adam's disobedience; (2) the ransom to Satan theory: Christ's death functioned as a payment offered to Satan to release sinful people from his dominion over them; (3) the substitution model: in love, Christ, as the sinless substitute for sinful people, took upon himself their sins

and granted his righteousness to justify them. Application of Christ's salvation centered on the gospel and adherence to it by faith, but the church eventually underscored the necessity of baptism. As for the recipients and manner of baptism, the church baptized believers and children by immersion, pouring, and sprinkling. Eventually, baptism became associated with regeneration and cleansing from original sin.

Fittingly, the church defined itself doctrinally: It is (1) one, not many churches or heretical sects, but united around the apostolic faith; (2) holy, consecrated for God's purposes, with its members living in accord with true doctrine; (3) catholic, or universal, extending over the whole world by its teaching of sound doctrine; and (4) apostolic, adhering to the teachings of the apostles. Accordingly, Christians confessed, "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." This church would continue until Christ's second coming, which would initiate his thousand year reign on earth, to be followed by Christ's ultimate defeat of Satan and the new heaven and earth. This widespread premillennialism eventually gave way to amillennialism, which denied a future reign of Christ on earth prior to the renewal of all things.

The Medieval Period

Doctrinal development flourished in the medieval period as theology became the "queen of the sciences." Guided by its commitment to "faith seeking understanding," the church advanced proofs for the existence of God, explored the nature and works of angels, solidified the doctrine of the Trinity, and more. A new model of the atonement—the satisfaction theory—viewed sin as robbing God of his honor, and thus salvation was its restoration. Such satisfaction had to go beyond anything sinful people could accomplish; thus the God-man, Jesus Christ, offered his death as a satisfaction for sin, restoring God's honor. This model was opposed by the moral influence theory, which held that Christ's life and death provide a persuasive exhibition of God's love that kindles a reciprocating love in people. This model changed the atonement from an objective work accomplished on the cross to a subjective influence in people's hearts. Important doctrinal formulations paved the way for both the advancement and the retreat of the church:

1. The procession of the Holy Spirit. Whereas the church in the East believed the Spirit proceeds from the Father, the church in the West believed he proceeds from both the Father and the Son. This doctrinal

disagreement contributed to the division of the church into the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, respectively.

2. The nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Whereas the early church understood this rite in various ways—a sacrifice, an act of commemoration, the medicine of immortality, a symbol, the body and blood of Christ—the medieval church eventually proclaimed the doctrine of transubstantiation: Christ's "body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament . . . under the forms of bread and wine" as those elements are changed through divine power. This position would be opposed by all of the Protestant Reformers.

3. The sacramental system. The seven sacraments—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony—were seen to cover the whole of the faithful's life and infuse grace into it.

4. The extent of the church's authority. As the influence of the bishop of Rome increased steadily, the papacy developed not only theologically but also politically. Papal authority reached its height in the medieval period, as the popes declared their superiority over secular powers, claimed infallibility for themselves (made dogma by Vatican Council I in 1870) and indefectibility for the church, and asserted authority over Scripture itself. This last development was bolstered by claims that the church had determined the canon of Scripture and was the conveyor of tradition, a mode of divine revelation of equal authority to Scripture. Around that time, the church was rocked by political disasters (the papacy's removal to France for seventy years), internal divisions (the election of two or three popes simultaneously), moral bankruptcy (the rise in sexual immorality among the priesthood), and spiritual impoverishment (the hawking of indulgences in place of preaching). All this created a climate for renewal.

The Reformation

The Reformation arose in this desperate situation and developed Protestant doctrines through close attention to Scripture, careful consideration of early church beliefs, and rejection of unsubstantiated dogmas and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The formal principle of Protestantism was sola Scriptura: Scripture alone—not Scripture plus tradition, not Scripture plus church authority, not Scripture plus the apocryphal writings—is the supreme authority for doctrine and

practice. While agreeing with the historic position that Scripture is divinely inspired and completely true, Protestant theology broke from Catholic theology by affirming Scripture's sufficiency, necessity, and clarity.

The material principle of Protestantism was the doctrine of justification, God's declaration that sinful people are "not guilty" but "righteous instead," not because of any inherent goodness or any good works they do, but because of the righteousness of Christ imputed (credited) to them, giving them forgiveness and acquittal before God. Such divine work is by grace alone, not by grace enabling people to cooperate with it so as to merit eternal life; by Christ alone, not by the sacrifice of Christ plus the church; through faith alone, not faith together with good works and love; and for God's glory alone, not glory to God and special honor to, for example, Mary. Thus Protestant theology became characterized by the five solas: Scripture, grace, Christ, faith, and God's glory are the ultimate causes of salvation.

As Protestant churches broke free from the Catholic Church, they defined themselves doctrinally. In addition to affirming the four historic characteristics of the church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—Protestant theology held that the true church bears two (for some, three) marks: (1) the preaching of the Word of God; (2) the celebration of the sacraments, of which there are only two—baptism and the Lord's Supper; and (3) the exercise of church discipline. In terms of the atonement, Protestantism developed the penal substitutionary theory. Unlike the satisfaction theory, which grounded the atonement in the honor of God, the penal substitutionary model grounded it in his holiness, justice, and love. Because he is holy, God hates sin and prescribes an eternal penalty to pay for it. As the substitute for sinful people, Christ died as a sacrifice to pay the penalty for their sins, thus justly removing their eternal condemnation forever. Such atonement is the highest expression of the love of God for sinful people.

The Modern and Postmodern Ages

Due to the rise of many challenges to the Christian faith, all doctrines have been and continue to be under attack. Below are four key doctrines and various recent claims challenging them:

1. The doctrine of Scripture: the Bible is not inspired, truthful, or authoritative.

2. The doctrine of God: the Trinity is incomprehensible; God is not

sovereign over all things; a loving God would not punish people for their sins; human language is inadequate to speak about God; God does not exist.
3. The doctrine of creation: evolution explains the origin and development of all that exists; God did not specially create people in his own image; Adam and Eve never existed.
4. Christology: the historicity of Jesus is unimportant; the incarnation is a myth; the penal substitutionary theory must be false because it depends on a wrathful God who demands punishment for sin; it would be unfair for faith in Christ to be the only means of salvation.

Despite these challenges, Christian doctrine demonstrates its resiliency. For example, through the expansion of Pentecostal theology and the charismatic movement, churches are giving much needed attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the influence of Karl Barth, theologians are refining all doctrines in light of the doctrine of the Trinity. Christian philosophers and apologists are defending the faith. And evangelical churches are flourishing worldwide through focus on the gospel, which they are taking to every corner of the globe.

Accordingly, as it has from its beginning, the contemporary church faithfully continues to construct and live out sound doctrine in order to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Theological Traditions within Christendom

Christendom is the religion and churches of the three traditions of Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. While all three derive from the one trunk of the Christian faith and church, the three branches developed through major divisions. Because of their shared origin, the three traditions possess many commonalities, and because of their separation, their many differences are quite pronounced.

One Church

Filled with love for the world that he created, the Father sent his Son to accomplish salvation for sinful people and, through the Holy Spirit, to incorporate those who believe the gospel into the church. Consisting of both Jews and Gentiles and stirred by the vision of ransomed people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9), the church was designed to be "one flock" (John 10:16), "one body" (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Indeed, the early church defined itself as "one, holy, catholic,

and apostolic”—united in doctrine, life, mission, and worship.

As the church expanded, the Eastern and Western churches became characterized by different languages, theological emphases, and liturgies. For example, the Eastern church employed Greek, while the Western church used Latin. Also, the Eastern church believed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, while the Western church maintained that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. These smoldering divergences, when fueled by political machinations and ecclesiastical power plays, ignited into full flame. The flashpoint occurred in a.d. 1054, when Christendom split into Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. The decay of the latter tradition over the next five hundred years stimulated a clamor and climate for renewal. The Reformations of the sixteenth century developed in response to this desperate situation, and Western Christendom again split into Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, with the latter tradition expressing itself in different denominations, such as Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, the Anabaptists and Baptists, and Methodism.

Depending on one’s perspective, one may focus on the many commonalities that still unite these three traditions, emphasize the many differences that still divide them, or—as this article does—face squarely both the commonalities and the differences.

Commonalities

In obedience to Scripture’s command to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), the church has formulated a common core of belief, a theological consensus embraced by Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. These commonalities derive from the major emphases of Scripture, from the early creeds, and from beliefs assumed by the church from the beginning and regularly and extensively expressed in its liturgies, sermons, catechisms, and writings.

Scripture. The three traditions uphold the God-breathed nature, or inspiration, of the Bible; the truthfulness of what it affirms; its authority (in some measure); the transformative power of Scripture; and its centrality for salvation, Christian living, and worship.

God. The three traditions affirm the existence of God; his knowability through both general and special revelation; and the divine attributes of independence, immutability, eternity, simplicity, spirituality/invisibility,

omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, wisdom, truthfulness, faithfulness, goodness, love, grace, mercy, patience, holiness, jealousy, wrath, righteousness/justice, glory, and peace.

Trinity. The three traditions maintain the essential elements of the doctrine of the triunity, or three-in-oneness, of God: God eternally exists as three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); each of the three persons is fully God; yet there is only one God.

Creation and providence. The three traditions believe that God created the entire universe ex nihilo (out of nothing) and sustains his creation while directing it to its divinely designed goal, often through secondary causes (e.g., he sends rain to water the earth; he holds the king's heart in his hand).

Angelic beings. The three traditions acknowledge the reality and activity of created beings whose nature is immaterial. They believe that these spiritual beings include angels who worship God, communicate his will, and serve Christians, and also Satan and demons, those originally good angels who rebelled and now seek to resist God and his will.

Human beings. The three traditions teach that God created human beings in his image, thereby conferring dignity and significance on all people, that he gave these image-bearers a divine mandate to engage in building civilization (Gen. 1:28), and that they have a complex nature, consisting of both body and soul/spirit.

Sin. The three traditions acknowledge that all human beings are sinful, being associated with Adam in his fall and committing personal sin; thus, both original (or ancestral) and actual sin contribute to human sinfulness.

Jesus Christ. The three traditions confess that the eternally existing Son of God took on human nature in the incarnation, being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; the resulting God-man is fully divine and fully human, two natures united in the person of Jesus Christ. The three traditions uphold this doctrine of Christ in accordance with the Chalcedonian Creed (a.d. 451).

Salvation accomplished. The three traditions believe that Jesus Christ, through his incarnation, holy life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, accomplished salvation on behalf of sinful humanity.

Holy Spirit. The three traditions hold that the Holy Spirit is a divine person, coequal in nature, power, and glory with the Father and the Son, and that he should be worshiped together with them.

Salvation applied. The three traditions affirm that salvation is a gracious, mighty work of God that includes the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, and conversion.

Church. The three traditions portray the church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The church is further characterized by its unity, holiness, catholicity/universality, and apostolicity; and it exists to worship God, build up Christians, and engage non-Christians with the gospel.

Sacraments/ordinances. The three traditions administer specific rites, or ceremonies, that communicate or express in a concrete manner God's grace to his people. The two rites practiced by all three traditions are baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist.

Personal eschatology. The three traditions affirm that death is the penalty for sin and, thus, the destiny of all sinful people; still, life continues after death in the intermediate state, the period between personal death and the return of Christ.

Cosmic eschatology. The three traditions express hope in the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the body, the last judgment, eternal life for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked, and the renewal of all creation in the new heaven and new earth.

Interpretation of Scripture. Roman Catholicism holds that the prerogative to establish the true and authoritative interpretation of the Bible belongs to its magisterium, or teaching office, which consists of the pope and bishops. Protestantism rejects the papacy and its claim to possess the sole right to interpret the Bible. It emphasizes instead the clarity and necessity of Scripture, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and the responsibility of elders, or pastor-teachers, to encourage Christians to read Scripture with a proper understanding. Eastern Orthodoxy underscores the importance of the Spirit's leading the church to understand Scripture in accord with the church's tradition.

Trinity. Roman Catholicism and Protestantism confess that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (filioque), while Eastern Orthodoxy confesses his procession from the Father alone. According to Catholic and Protestant theology, the eternal procession of the Spirit does not mean that he was created, nor that he derives his deity from the Father and the Son; rather, the Father and the Son grant to the Holy Spirit his personhood. Orthodox theology maintains that the Spirit

receives his deity from the Father. Orthodoxy also makes a distinction between the essence of God and his energies, affirming that the latter can be known, but not the former. Catholic and Protestant theologies minimize or reject the doctrine of energies.

Sin. Roman Catholicism holds to original sin as consisting of both the guilt inherited from Adam and the corruption of human nature. Eastern Orthodoxy denies inherited guilt, emphasizing mortality as what is inherited and sinfulness as the consequence of mortality. Protestantism considers original sin as consisting of both inherited guilt and the corruption of human nature, with many Protestants going beyond Catholic and Orthodox theology on this latter aspect, affirming both total depravity and total inability.

Mary and the saints. Roman Catholicism accords high honor to Mary, embracing her immaculate conception, sinlessness, perpetual virginity, sufferings as she endured her Son's crucifixion and joined herself to his sacrifice, motherhood of all humanity and especially of the Church, and bodily assumption into heaven. The Catholic Church affirms her as theotokos, or bearer of God, and gives her the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. Following her example and invoking her intercession, as they are to do with all the saints, the Catholic faithful venerate the saints and supervenerate Mary. Eastern Orthodoxy similarly acknowledges Mary as theotokos, but not the other Catholic doctrines concerning her, and it encourages its faithful to request the intercession of Mary and the saints. Protestantism embraces Mary as theotokos as an affirmation of the deity of the Son whom she bore, but it rejects the Catholic doctrines about Mary as well as the invocation of Mary and the saints.

Salvation. Roman Catholicism defines justification as "not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man," thereby joining justification, sanctification, and regeneration. Accordingly, salvation is initiated by divine grace infused into sinful people through the sacraments, which renders them capable of cooperating with grace through love and good deeds to merit eternal life. Salvation, therefore, is synergistic, a work involving both God's grace and human effort. Protestantism defines justification as the mighty act of God by which he declares sinful people "not guilty" but "righteous instead," not on the basis of any inherent goodness or personal virtue merited through

good works, but because the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed, or credited, to them. Such salvation, which is monergistic (wrought by God alone), is by grace alone, accomplished by Christ alone, and embraced through faith alone. Justification by faith alone is the material principle of Protestantism and signifies that this mighty declarative act of God is appropriated by trust in Christ's saving work and not earned by good deeds nor prompted by grace infused through the sacraments. Eastern Orthodoxy has avoided the Catholic-Protestant controversy over justification. It emphasizes deification, or theosis, the process not of becoming God by taking on his essence, but of becoming like him, permeated by his energies. One aid to deification is icons, which are windows into the divine realm; thus, they promote worship and spiritual virtues. Neither Catholicism nor Protestantism is favorable to icons.
Church. The Roman Catholic Church claims to be the one true church, because it alone possesses the creed (a common faith), the liturgy (the worship of God), and apostolic succession (the papacy). Moreover, the Catholic Church identifies itself as the continuation of the incarnation of Christ, so that he in his totality—his divine and human natures, together with his body—exists in the Church. This Church is governed by the pope and the bishops and is the universal sacrament of salvation. Protestantism emphasizes that the true church exists where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. Thus, Protestants assemble in churches, not just in ecclesial communities as Catholicism maintains, and deny that Christ conferred his authority on the pope as successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ. Protestant churches are characterized by gospel preaching, regular celebration of two sacraments/ordinances, discipleship, missional endeavors like evangelism and mercy ministries, and leadership consisting of two offices (pastors/elders and deacons) or, for some, three offices (bishops, pastors/elders, and deacons). Eastern Orthodoxy, which also claims to be the one true church, emphasizes the unity of all bishops and denies papal supremacy; indeed, its repudiation of the supreme authority of the pope is the key ecclesial point of separation between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. It consists of various self-governing church bodies, theologically and liturgically united but geographically distinct: patriarchates, autocephalous churches, and autonomous churches.
Sacraments/ordinances. Roman Catholicism considers the sacraments to

be elements in nature—water, oil, bread, wine—capable of receiving and transmitting divine grace when consecrated by the Church. Thus they are visible, concrete signs of an invisible yet real grace. Necessary for salvation, the sacraments are effective ex opere operato: they automatically communicate grace as they are administered. There are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. Protestantism denies this nature-grace interdependence, the validity of the sacraments ex opere operato, and the number of sacraments, maintaining that Christ ordained only two sacraments, or ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. These rites are effective because they are gospel realities, associated with the Word of God and the Spirit of God and embraced by faith. Eastern Orthodoxy has never formalized the number of sacraments, or holy mysteries, but does administer the Eucharist as the "sacrament of sacraments," along with the other six found in Catholicism. These sacraments are means by which the Orthodox faithful are mystically united to Christ, thus attaining theosis.

Personal eschatology. All three traditions concur about the two eternal destinies: eternal life for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked. Roman Catholicism adds a temporal destiny—purgatory—for its faithful members who die in the grace of God yet are imperfectly purified; they must undergo purification, rendering satisfaction for their forgiven sins, so as to achieve the holiness needed to enter heaven. Protestantism rejects the doctrine of purgatory, finding no biblical basis for it and appealing to the finished work of Christ and justification as dispelling any need for purification after death. Eastern Orthodoxy cautions against speculation regarding the afterlife, denying the notion of purification by purgatorial fire while still encouraging prayers for the dead.

Divided Christendom

As the religion of the churches of three traditions, Christendom is divided into Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. A core of commonalities unites these traditions, yet even these family resemblances may mask the great divide separating these three very diverse systems. Followers of all three traditions should rejoice over genuine agreements and honestly and frankly face their disagreements. As churches, especially of the evangelical kind, engage in proclaiming the gospel and planting churches among people who have never before

heard of Jesus Christ, the vision of Christians being ransomed “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9) underscores Christ’s promise that he is building his church (Matt. 16:18) and fosters hope that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) will one day be fulfilled.

The Origin and Authority of the Biblical Canon

The Bible is not like other books. While most books (generally speaking) are written by a single author in a single location, the Bible is composed of 66 smaller books written by a variety of different authors. And these authors represent a wide range of historical contexts, geographical settings, and theological perspectives. Such a scenario raises a number of natural questions. What do all these books have in common? And what is the process by which they were gathered together? And why does the Bible contain just these 66 books? All of these questions have to do with the origins of the biblical canon—that collection of books recognized as Scripture by God’s people.

The complexities associated with the development of the Canon have led biblical critics to attack the authority of Scripture at precisely this point. Since the Canon was formed over such long periods of time, it is argued, how can we be sure it contains the right books? This uncertainty about the boundaries of the Canon has been fueled by discussions about the authorship of biblical books—and whether some may have been composed by forgers—as well as by the discovery of apocryphal books such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter.

Despite these many challenges—which cannot be fully addressed in this brief article—there are still good reasons for Christians to be confident the books we have in the biblical canon are the ones God intended.

The Divine Qualities of Canonical Books

From the very beginning of the church, Christians have argued that books can be recognized as divinely inspired by their own internal characteristics. In other words, the books themselves give evidence that they are from God. The third-century church father Origen argued in precisely this way: “If anyone ponders over the prophetic sayings . . . it is certain that in the very act of reading and diligently studying them his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognize the words he is reading are not utterances of man but the language of

God" (On First Principles 4.1.6). Reformed thinkers such as Calvin, Owen, Turretin, and Bavinck made similar arguments, along with confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.5) and the Belgic Confession (5.2).

This conviction that the biblical books have such divine qualities flows naturally from the belief that they are constituted by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Christian belief that natural revelation bears evidence that it is the work of God—"The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1)—suggests we should expect the same of special revelation.

The existence of these divine qualities reminds us there was a tangible, objective way for canonical books to be recognized. Books did not find their way into the Canon for arbitrary reasons, nor on the whims of some person or group who happened to bear influence or power. Instead, these books found their way into the Canon on the basis of their own merits and qualities. They were simply the books that proved to be more compelling than all the other books available—a process not too unlike the survival of the fittest. In this way, we can say that biblical books, in some sense, really chose themselves.

What exactly are these divine qualities indicating a book is from God? That subject cannot be explored in detail here, but some examples would include the beauty and excellency of Scripture (Ps. 19:8; 119:103), its power and efficacy (Ps. 119:50, 98, 105, 111; Heb. 4:12–13), and its unity and harmony.

The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit

Even if these objective internal qualities are present, one might wonder what assurance we can have that the church has rightly recognized them. What if the church got it wrong? Moreover, if these qualities are really present, then why do not more people see them? Why do so many reject the Bible if the books therein really are so unique? The answer is that people's ability to see these qualities is correlative to their own spiritual situation. If one is to recognize spiritual qualities, he has to be an individual filled with the Spirit.

Because people are fallen and corrupted by sin, they must have the testimonium spiritus sancti internum, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, if they are to recognize rightly the qualities of scriptural books. To be clear, the testimonium is not some private revelation—as if the Spirit were whispering in our ear a list of canonical books. Instead, the

testimonium should be understood as the powerful work of the Spirit to overcome the noetic (mind-related) effects of sin and help a person see the qualities of Scripture that are objectively present.

Since God has given the Holy Spirit not only to individuals, but also to his corporate church, we can have a great deal of confidence the church has rightly recognized the books of the biblical canon. If so, the consensus of the church regarding the Canon—a consensus spanning thousands of years—can provide an additional layer of certainty about whether we have the right books. This church consensus does not mean, of course, that the church is infallible or somehow "creates" the Canon. Rather, this consensus shows that the church, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is compelled to respond to the powerful internal qualities objectively present in these books.

Ridderbos sums it up: "Christ will establish and build His church by causing the church to accept just this canon and, by means of the assistance and witness of the Holy Spirit, to recognize it as His" (Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures, 37). Or, even better, "My sheep hear my voice, . . . and they follow me" (John 10:27).

Historical Confirmation

The existence of divine qualities in these books and the help of the Holy Spirit to recognize them (not to mention the consensus of the church), already provide excellent reasons for us to be confident we have the right books in the biblical canon. On top of this, the historical evidence about how the OT and NT developed provides even further confirmation.

In regard to the OT, there is solid evidence that the boundaries of the Canon were already in place by the time of Jesus. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, actually lists the books of the OT canon (Against Apion 1.38–42)—a list that appears to match the 39 books in our Canon today. This has led scholars to suggest that the OT canon in the first century was universal and well defined. In this same time period, Philo, a Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, shows that the Jewish canon was already divided into an established threefold division when he refers to "[the] Law, [the] words spoken by God through the Prophets, and [the] Psalms" (Contemplative Life 25).

Philo's threefold division is an echo of Luke 24:44, where Jesus, speaking of the OT, refers to "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms." This threefold division also appears in much earlier texts,

such as the Jewish work Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the Qumran fragment 4QMMT. This matrix of historical testimony led Stephen Chapman to suggest, “By the turn of the millennium, a Jewish canon of Scripture was largely in place, if not absolutely defined and delimited in scope” (“The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church,” Ex Auditu 19 [2003]: 137).

The stability of the OT canon at this point is exemplified by the fact that the NT is utterly silent regarding any canonical disagreements among the many factions in first-century Judaism. The various Jewish sects—Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes—disagreed about a great many things in the Scriptures. And Jesus was often drawn into these debates. But it is noteworthy that, in the midst of these debates, there is never even a hint of disagreement or discussion about which books were considered Scripture. Jesus often cites from OT books as Scripture, and expects that his opponents believe (and read) the same books. Indeed, Jesus holds them accountable to the very teaching in these books. Moreover, there is not a single instance where Jesus or any NT author cites a book as Scripture that is not in our current OT—a stunning fact that deserves more attention than it typically receives (Jude 14–15 cites 1 Enoch but never refers to it as Scripture).

When it comes to the NT, the historical evidence is just as (if not more) compelling. It is clear that by the middle of the second century, a “core” collection of NT books was already regarded (and used) as Scripture by early Christian communities. This core collection would have consisted of approximately 22 of the 27 books of the NT, including the four Gospels, 13 epistles of Paul, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John (and maybe 2 John), Hebrews, and Revelation. The fact that this “core” was in place at such an early time suggests substantial unity around most NT books from the very start. Moreover, it also tells us most of the disputes within early Christianity centered on only a small number of books, such as 2 Peter, James, Jude, and 3 John.

Even the NT itself provides some clues about the development of a new canon of writings. Most notably, 2 Peter 3:16 tells us Paul’s letters were already viewed as Scripture on par with the OT, and 1 Timothy 5:18 contains a possible citation of Luke 10:7 as “Scripture.” Both of these texts suggest an early canonical consciousness already present in the first century. It should also be observed that the NT writings often present

themselves as authoritative documents for the church. For instance, Paul regularly presents his words as the very words of God (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:36–38; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14) and asks that his letters be read in the public worship of the church (2 Cor. 10:9–11; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; cf. Rev. 1:3).

In the second century, a number of historical sources confirm the trend already present in the NT itself. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (writing c. a.d. 125), plainly received Mark and Matthew, and there are good reasons to think he also knew 1 John, 1 Peter, Revelation, and perhaps even some of Paul's letters. Justin Martyr (writing c. 150) appears to adopt all four Gospels and informs us they were read publicly in worship alongside the OT. Irenaeus (writing c. 180) exemplifies the "core" canon present in the second century as he received the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline collection (minus Philemon), Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation. Our earliest canonical list, the Muratorian fragment, dates from about the same time as Irenaeus and affirms the canonicity of the four Gospels, Acts, the 13 epistles of Paul, Jude, 1 and 2 John (and possibly 3 John), and Revelation.

In sum, there is tremendous evidence for an early acceptance of the books of both the OT and the NT. That historical evidence, combined with the internal qualities of these books and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, provides a solid foundation upon which our confidence can rest. And, on top of this, we can appeal to the providence and sovereignty of God who presided over the entire process. If God intended his people to have his Word, we can be confident he could work in the midst of historical circumstances to make sure they did so.

The Christian Life

The God of the Bible, in contrast to the gods of all manmade religions, is the living God (Jer. 10:10) who in Christ has become for us "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15). But what is this "life" he so freely shares with us? Certainly it is more than a mere existence beyond death. If that were it, we would assume it was a life with a catch, a life of eternally trying to pay back the debt we owe to Christ. Jesus explained, "This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Knowing God is life. And given what this most infinitely beautiful God is like, you cannot know him truly without loving him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matt. 22:37–38). Such is the life the Spirit breathes into us: he opens our eyes to appreciate God in all his grace and glory, and that sweet knowledge inclines and wins our hearts to him. Moreover, since God is the "blessed" or "happy" God (1 Tim. 1:11), to know him is to enter a life of joy. "What is the coming-to-life of the new man?" asks the Heidelberg Catechism. "It is wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to" (Q. 90).

The Life We Were Made For

This, in fact, is the very life for which we were created. In the beginning, the Lord God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Yet Adam exchanged that life for death when he sinned. Then Christ came as the "last Adam," and, having overcome death for us, breathed out the Holy Spirit on his people, giving them new life (John 20:22; 1 Cor. 15:45).

The Christian life, then, is not some abstract existence unrelated to the real world of creation. It is the life Adam was meant to live as he ate, tended the garden, and looked after the animals. To be reconciled with our Creator and know peace with God through Christ is what we were made for. Being truly human means knowing, loving, glorifying, and enjoying God in all we do.

The Christian life, then, is the true life for which mankind was created. Yet it is also much, much more: the life we are given in Christ is

the very life of God shared with us.

The Life of God

For eternity, God the Father has known, loved, and enjoyed his perfect Son, pouring out the Spirit upon him. Now, in salvation, that same Spirit has been poured out upon believers, that we might be known and loved like the Son. In other words, the life we are given in Christ is the life of being children of God. “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom. 8:14–15). The eternal Son, of course, always has an absolutely unique status as the only begotten Son, sharing the very being of his Father; but in him believers enjoy his life and righteous standing before the Father. He is the preeminent firstborn, but with him and in him we are children of God and fellow heirs (Rom. 8:17; Heb. 2:11–12).

This means that, united to Christ by the Spirit, believers are loved by the Father with the love he has always had for his Son. And it means that, sharing the life of the Son before the Father, we begin to share the heart cry of the Son: “Abba! Father!” As the Son, full of the Spirit, has always been filled with love for the Father, so the Spirit of adoption awakens in believers the Son’s own delight in his Father. The same Spirit also excites Christians with the Father’s love for his Son. That is why Jesus could say, “If God were your Father, you would love me” (John 8:42). The Father and the Son thus share their own life and fellowship in the Spirit: loved by the Father as adopted children, believers delight in the Father as the Son does and delight in the Son as the Father does.

It is not, then, that God gives believers only some wonderful thing called “life”; he actually gives us himself to enjoy forever. Christ himself is our life (Col. 3:4), and in him we share his Spirit-filled life before the Father. Thus the Christian life is not a life of trying to earn God’s favor, and it is not a life of trying to pay God back; it is a life of enjoying communion with a God in whose presence is fullness of joy (Ps. 16:11).

The Life of Love

It would be quite impossible to share God’s life, or to become

like God, without sharing his love and concern for the world and the people he has created. The Spirit of adoption longs to remold us so that those who share the status of the Son also come to share the character of the Son. In those he has definitively sanctified and made his holy people, he works progressively to make them more and more like Christ, full of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–25).

Primarily the Spirit does this by enlightening us through Scripture to the beauty of the Son and his ways (John 15:26; 2 Cor. 3:18). Only then, when our desires are changed so that we begin to want him and want to be like him, will we choose the lifelong and disciplined fight against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. That is, through bringing us to love God, the Spirit brings us to share God's passions—and so to love our neighbor as well.

Vitally, the Spirit also brings us into the community of life (his redeemed people, the church) so that we can help others and be helped to exchange our old "life" of dehumanizing sin for the true life of doing the Father's good will. There among the people of God, taught by Scripture, we are trained by the Spirit to love praising God together and to hate sin, love holiness, and overflow with God's own self-giving love for others. To use an OT image, planted by the river of living water that is the Spirit, we become, like Christ, a fruitful tree of life (Ps. 1:1–3).

Blossoming Life

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Where sin leaves us all naturally wasted and withered, Jesus gives such life through the Spirit that shriveled souls blossom. Once slaves to sin and spiritually dead, we become children of God, alive and free. And filled with the living Spirit of God, men and women once curved in on themselves begin to radiate with love for God and neighbor. As God is holy and glorious, so they become ever more pure and radiant.

For now, we experience this life only in the bud: it is a taste of glory, but terribly hampered by the sin we will struggle with until death. Yet when Christ returns and raises us from the dead, it will be life in full bloom that we will know: without sin, doubt, pain, or death. Like Christ, the glorious Light of the World, the children of God begin now (often only

dimly) to “shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). But on that day when Christ returns to perfect and glorify them, they will “shine like the brightness of the sky above; . . . like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

The Church

The Nature of the Church

The church is the new covenant community of Jesus—rooted in Israel, built by Jesus, and inaugurated by the Holy Spirit. The church is the elect people of God, chosen by the Father and graciously brought into a relationship with the triune God and one another. The church is the redeemed communion of the saints, bought by the blood of Christ, including all believers throughout all the ages—those on earth and those in heaven. The church is the adopted family of God, once separated from him but now brought into a loving and intimate relationship with God as Father and with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church is the body of Christ, having Christ as head, dependent on him, gifted by the Holy Spirit, created as a unity with diversity, dependent upon one another, and functioning as Christ's agents in the world. The church is the bride of Christ, specially loved by him, saved by his sacrificial work on the cross, exclusively devoted to him, and increasingly adorned in beauty for him as her bridegroom. The church is the new temple of the Spirit, filled with the fullness of Christ and marked by God's presence. The church is the new humanity, composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians united together in Christ, displaying the way life was always supposed to be. The church is the gathered covenant community, visibly and regularly coming together for worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry, and mission. The church is the eschatological community of the kingdom, existing in the already and not yet, living out God's eternal purpose of cosmic reconciliation.

Local and Universal

The word church (ekklēsia) in the NT refers to house churches (1 Cor. 16:19; Philem. 2), metropolitan churches (Acts 8:1; 20:17), provincial churches (Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 16:19), and the whole worldwide church (Matt. 16:18). It usually refers to the visible church, the gathered community of God's people covenanted together to worship the triune God, love one another, and witness to the world. Sometimes church is used in a different manner, of the invisible church, which highlights the unity of all believers everywhere, both living and dead (1 Cor. 1:2). The universal church is not synonymous with any one

organization, denomination, or association. It is never entirely visible to humans. Only God knows the sum total of all believers from all places and all times.

The Attributes and Marks of the Church

Early Christians described the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The church is one in that believers have been united together in the same Lord Jesus Christ and are to promote visibly this eternal spiritual union (John 17:20–23; Rom. 12:3–8). “There is one body and one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4–6). The church’s unity transcends all earthly distinctions of ethnicity, social status, or gender (Gal. 3:27–28).

The church is holy as its members have been set apart unto God, constituted as saints, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and consecrated to the service of God, so that they now walk in his ways. The church is catholic, or universal, in that the church is never confined to any one place or people. The Great Commission directs the church to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20), and the result will be universal, as disciples “from every tribe and language and people and nation” will worship Jesus (Rev. 5:9; 7:9–10).

The church is apostolic in that it is founded on the apostolic preaching of the gospel as found in the NT. Indeed, the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). The early church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching, which is associated with the Word of God (Acts 2:42; cf. 2 Tim. 1:12–14; 2:1–2; 3:10–4:8).

As an agent of the kingdom, the church reflects the already-and-not-yet nature of the kingdom. As such, the church is already one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Yet the church is also still incomplete in these attributes, growing in unity, holiness, catholicity, and truth.

Reformational churches added three marks to their definition of the church, features that distinguished true and false churches: pure preaching of the Word/gospel, proper administration of the sacraments/ordinances, and faithful exercise of church discipline. They needed these marks to distinguish their churches from those of Rome and various sects.

Authority and Service in the Church

Christians vary significantly concerning church government, but there are several common features. First and foremost, Christ is the head of the church (Matt. 16:18–19; Eph. 5:25–28). As such, he possesses ultimate authority over the church as a whole and over local congregations. Second, Christ expresses his authority through the leadership of the church (Matt. 18:15–20; Acts 6:3).

Third, though there is variety on this, most hold that the church has two offices. The first is that of pastors/elders/bishops. The term pastor denotes care and nurture with the Word (1 Pet 5:1–4), elder denotes maturity and wisdom (Titus 1:5–9), and bishop or overseer denotes leadership and administrative abilities (1 Tim. 3:1–7). A qualified pastor is a Christian of sound character who leads his family well, is a man of integrity in the community, and is gifted to teach the church.

The second office is that of deacons. Although the roles of deacons in Scripture are not entirely clear, their primary responsibilities focused on service to the church. The qualifications for deacons are similar—but not identical—to those for pastors and are found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

Fourth, spiritually gifted congregations are themselves central to fulfilling the ministries of the church. Pastors and other leaders teach and lead, but all members of the congregation bear responsibilities and are “ministers” too (Eph. 4:12–16). They actively use their diverse gifts (teaching, leadership, mercy, giving, etc.) to serve the Lord, the church, and others. Finally, decisions in church life should reflect the church’s nature, particularly its unity, holiness, truth, and love.

The Church’s Ministries and Worship

The church’s ministries can be summarized in four categories (Acts 2:40–47): doctrine, fellowship, worship, and witness in word and deed, including ministry to the poor. Scripture does not give any one list of things the church ought to do in worship. However, the NT gives a clear picture of what churches do in corporate worship, such as reading Scripture, preaching and teaching, praying, singing, confessing faith, baptizing, and participating in the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:40–47; 1 Cor.

11:2–16; Eph. 5:19–21; 1 Tim. 4:11). Central to this worship are the two ordinances (sacraments) that Jesus gave to his church: baptism and the Lord's Supper. See "Ordinances and Sacraments" on p. 1698.

The Church's Mission

God is on a mission to glorify himself by redeeming his image-bearers and renewing his good creation, restoring both to their intended shalom (peace or well-being). The church is a product and agent of this mission. As a product of God's mission, the church is the redeemed worshiping community, the recipient of God's gracious mission of redemption. As an agent of God's mission, the church is to glorify God among the nations by embodying, proclaiming, and promoting the good news that God is redeeming a people for himself and bringing all things under his good rule. See "The Gospel" on p. 1707.

Creation

God as Creator

The Bible begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and ends with God bringing about a new heaven and a new earth (Gen. 1:1; Revelation 21–22). As such, the doctrine of God as Creator frames the biblical story and plays a key role in Christian theology.

At its core, the doctrine of creation is that God, without the use of any preexisting material, brought into being all that is. Creation is a completely free act of God intended to communicate his excellence. He alone has no beginning (Ps. 90:2). God created all that is, including light, the earth, sky, water, vegetation, marine life, animals, angels, and everything else (Gen. 1:1–25; Ps. 148:1–5; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11). God has also directly created men and women, whom he made specially in his image (Gen. 1:27; 2:7; Mark 10:6; Rom. 5:12–21; James 3:9–12). All of creation reflects the design and order of God's eternal plan, having come into being by his wisdom (Jer. 10:12), will (Rev. 4:11), and word (Ps. 33:6–9).

Creation reveals God, bearing witness to his power and handiwork to all people, at all times, and in all places (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:18–32). Creation also brings glory to God, displaying his kingship, power, goodness, wisdom, love, and beauty (Gen. 1:1–28; Isa. 43:7; Rom. 11:33–36). Revelation 4:11 links God's role as Creator to his reception of worship and glory: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Creation through His Word

The Bible regularly highlights how God creates through his word. Genesis 1 conveys this through a refrain. God the King powerfully decrees, "Let there be . . . ," and creation obediently responds. Psalm 33 similarly declares, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:6, 9; cf. 148:5). Hebrews 11:3 reiterates, "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are

visible.”

Creation as a Work of the Trinitarian God

The spoken word that brought creation into being is vitally related to the eternal Word who was with God and was God (John 1:1). According to John, all things were made through Jesus the Word, and without this Word nothing was made (John 1:3). Paul speaks just as plainly about Jesus’ role in creation: “By him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16).

Thus creation is the work of the Trinitarian God (Genesis 1; Heb. 11:3). Paul further clarifies that God the Father is the source of creation, while the Son is the agent: “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). The Spirit of God, too, is active in creation (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30). All three persons act inseparably to create, but in a way that maintains personal distinctions.

The Father, Son, and Spirit delight in creation because it glorifies the Trinity and blesses men and women, created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26–28). This world is distinct from its Creator, the triune God, who has made himself known ultimately in Jesus Christ, revealed to us today in the Scriptures. Thus we recognize that it is not just any god who created the world; it is the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Creation, Sovereignty, and Providence

God’s rule in and over his creation is consistently made known in the Bible and is essential for the development of the doctrine of providence. The doctrine of creation shapes the understanding of God’s kingship, his governance of and sovereignty over the world (Isa. 37:16; Jer. 27:5; Amos 4:12–13). God’s wisdom and knowledge inform not only his kingship in creation, but also his governance of the world (Ps. 104:24; Prov. 3:19). The world order is not self-created, nor it is self-sustaining. The stability of the created world depends on the supernatural upholding of all things by the cosmic Christ (Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2–3), and the direction of the world is divinely ordained and purposed ultimately for the

glory of God and the good of his people (Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:3–14).

Creation, Worldview, and Worship

Knowing that God made the world, including humans as a part of it, is foundational to the pattern of Christian truth, the shaping of a Christian worldview, a doxological understanding of life (Psalm 148), and an understanding of the unfolding of God's revelation to mankind. The doctrine of creation leads to the idea of human stewardship of God's creation. Men and women as image-bearers of God hold creation in trust for him, exercising human responsibility for the world (Gen. 1:26–28). While the world as we know it has been affected by the fall (Genesis 3; Rom. 8:18–26), the doctrine of God as Creator points to the original goodness of creation, as seen in the affirmations of Genesis 1 (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

God is also independent and ontologically distinct from his creation. He created the sun, the moon, animals, and humans, but he himself is not any of these. There is therefore no place in a Christian doctrine of creation for atheism (the belief that there is no God), agnosticism (the belief that we either do not or cannot know if God exists), dualism (the belief that the spiritual world is superior to the physical one), pantheism (the belief that God is contained in creation), or naturalism (the belief that the physical order is all that exists).

Creation, the Fall, and the New Creation

Yet, the Christian doctrine of sin points to the recognition that the world has departed from the pristine condition into which God placed it—it has fallen from the glory with which it was created. The Christian doctrine of redemption includes the hope for creation's restoration to its original goodness. The fallen state, then, is only a temporary imperfection (Rom. 8:19–22), for it will be redeemed in the final work of God, the new creation (Isa. 65:17–25; Rev. 21:1–5).

The Praise and Glory of the Creator God

God is a purposeful God who creates in freedom. In creating, as well as in preserving, God is working out his ultimate purposes for humanity and the world. Because human beings are created by God, in the image of God, for the glory of God, and for the good of others, they

matter, and their lives are meaningful. The overall meaning, unity, and intelligibility of the universe are also affirmed in the doctrine of creation. In these doctrinal affirmations we see God’s greatness, goodness, power, beauty, and wisdom. The doctrine of creation finds its full explication in Jesus as the God-man who entered creation. He is the light and life of the world and will bring creation fully under his rule at the consummation of the world, leading to the ultimate praise and glory of the Creator God.

Doctrine and Preaching

Sacred Text and Theological Framework

The relationship between doctrine/theology and preaching is one of immense significance, because the interchange between the preacher's doctrinal framework and his sermon preparation will profoundly elevate both his theology and his preaching in its depth, accuracy, fidelity, clarity, richness, and gospel power.

Here is how it works. On the one hand we have the inerrant text of God's Word, while on the other hand we have a theological framework that we have come to trust and depend upon (say, Calvin's Institutes, or more recent theologies like those of Louis Berkhof, Herman Bavinck, or Wayne Grudem). As we prepare our exposition, both the text and our framework refresh and inform one another. On one level, our exegesis of the text shines new light on theological systems, allowing clarification and adjustment in order to develop doctrine that is both more consistent and more helpful. At the same time, our theological framework cannot help but influence the themes and priorities that will shape the flow of our sermon as we expound the text at hand.

Theological Framework and Sacred Text

For the preacher of the Word, theology is like an ancient yet living coach who has been gathering refinements and pointers over the centuries from early creeds and formulations, church councils, confessions, creeds, and Reformational theology, down to the precise dogmatics of the last century and the carefully wrought systematics of our day. J. I. Packer says this of systematic theology:

> It is called systematic . . . because it takes all the truths, visions, valuations and admonitions with which the Holy Spirit feeds the church through the Scriptures and seeks to think them together in a clear, coherent and orderly way. It separates out seven main topical fields—revelation; God; man; Christ; the Holy Spirit; the church; the future—and fills in all that Scripture is found to say about each.1

Beyond this, systematic theology analyzes and orders each of these fields so as to present them as clearly as possible and to relate them to the life of the church and the world.

Thus the refined theological wisdom of the millennia affords a vast treasure trove for the church and proven coaching for today's preachers as they expound the sacred text for their flock.

Accuracy. Paul's command to Timothy is to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). "Rightly handling" is based on the Greek word orthos ("straight"), so the exact charge is to impart the word of truth "without deviation, straight, undiluted,"2 to get it straight and to give it straight! Of course, we must remain open to improving our theological understanding through exegesis. At the same time, a good theology can be of immense help in understanding Scripture.

Take, for example, Hebrews 6:4–6: "It is impossible, in the case of 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, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt." On the surface, the writer seems to be saying that true believers can commit apostasy. But systematics can help us here, as Donald Macleod explains: "Dogmatics alerts us . . . to the fact that such an interpretation is untenable, and closer examination of the passage itself confirms that it is pointing in the direction of another doctrine altogether—the doctrine of temporary faith."3

As another example, an initial read of 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God") may suggest to some that when Christ was "made . . . to be sin," he was made to be sinful. But the christological and soteriological sections of our systematics clearly explicate the sinlessness of Christ, so that we understand that he was sinless through all of his 33 years and that when he was made to be sin on the cross, he nevertheless remained outwardly and inwardly impeccable as our sins were imputed to him and he, as our sinless Savior, bore the fiery wrath of God.

Elucidation. Another primary way that dogmatics informs our reading of Scripture is by demonstrating how Scripture relates to and interprets itself. This function of dogmatics is often beyond the range of grammatical study and exegesis and is termed the analogy of faith, about which the Westminster Confession of Faith states: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there

is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, it must be searched and known by other passages that speak more clearly" (1.9). In other words, doctrine formulated from other sections of Scripture will help us to understand a more difficult passage at hand.

A choice text for demonstrating this principle is Paul's command in Ephesians 5:18 to "be filled with the Spirit." Here Macleod demonstrates the benefit of systematics as follows:

The only way to expound [Eph. 5:18] is by taking account of the whole doctrine of the believer's relation to the Spirit: the facts are that (1) every believer has been filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 1 Cor. 12:13), (2) believers may be filled repeatedly (Acts 2:4; cf. 4:8), (3) the Lord promises that in every emergency the Spirit will teach us what to say (Luke 12:12), (4) there is an abiding in Christ as well as receiving of Christ, and (5) the ideal condition for a Christian is to be full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5). Unless we draw upon the whole doctrine we cannot possible elucidate Ephesians 5:18.4

This is not to suggest that a pastor should preach all of the above when he preaches the command of Ephesians 5:18 in its context; rather, his preaching of the command will be enlightened and deepened by the analogy of Scripture.

Many texts can be illumined and clarified by drawing from the deep wells of systematics. The doctrine of providence, for example, helps us to understand Joseph's words to his brothers concerning their selling him into slavery: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). Likewise the doctrines of the Trinity and adoption shed light on Romans 8:15—"You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry 'Abba! Father!'"

Protection. The danger of falling into heretical beliefs and teaching is ever-present. For example, the Trinitarian mystery of God's eternal being as three persons subsisting in one nature (Father, Son, and Spirit) has suffered from those who have attempted to shrink it to comprehensible terms, thus once again opening the door to the ancient heresy of modalism (that God is one person playing three parts or roles), a version of which Oneness Pentecostalism espouses. Others flirt perilously with undercutting the unique singular nature of God. Because old heresies tend to resurface, theology helps us to avoid the pitfalls of putting biblical

data together in a way that replicates past errors.

For example, some are in danger of misusing the truth of perichoresis (which argues that the three divine persons equally share the same, undivided divine nature or essence [ousia] and thus the persons are truly in each other, interpenetrating and indwelling each other). Some propose instead that the divine persons are one not in their sharing the same, identical divine nature but more in terms of a freely willed relational unity, which, if not careful, tends in the direction of tritheism.

Orthodox Trinitarian theology helps us to preserve both the unity of God's nature and the personal distinctions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thus allowing us to do justice to the biblical data that presents the one true and living God in all of his triune glory.

The siren song of such teaching has intrinsic appeal to a contemporary culture that seeks to obviate distinctions in traditional roles and authority, which are properly modeled after the revelation and activity of the Trinity in creation and redemption. Here, the faithful pastor will find essential help from the past in order to discern errant theology in the present, and thus guard his own thinking and that of his people. The help extends all the way back to the declaration of the Nicene Creed concerning "the only-begotten Son of God . . . of one substance (ousia) with the Father . . . who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens," on to the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith that "in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance" (8.2), and then to the painstaking explications of contemporary dogmatics.

The Wise Use of Theology in Preaching

When it comes to preparing a text and expounding it for the people, the preacher must make sure that his theological framework (as excellent as it may be) does not blunt the force of the text. For example, when preaching on 1 John 3:9 ("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"), the preacher could possibly so stress the doctrine of perseverance in such a way as to mute the sobering force of John's warning and thus promote a false security in his hearers. In doing this, the preacher would be working against the Holy Spirit who authored the warning.

Likewise, the magnificent doctrine of election could be misappropriated so as to cast a pall over the universal offer of salvation in John 3:16 or to

dim the declaration of 1 Timothy 2:3–4 that “God our Savior . . . desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” These texts are not about perseverance or election. Those grand doctrines are pillars in the sovereign architecture of our salvation, but they must not be used to soften or diminish the force of God’s Word.

Along with this, the preacher must not preach his dogmatics, as beautiful as his system may be. Dogmatics synthesizes the truth of the Word and organizes it in a coherent and orderly way to serve the church. It is not the Word of God; it is about the Word of God. And moreover, the imposition of its structure on the preaching of a text will abuse the divinely given thrust and contours of the sacred text and evacuate it of its intended power. The divine call to preach the Word is to preach it in its context.

The Blessed Interface

As the preacher approaches the text, he knows that his job is to preach the text in its context, preaching no more and no less than what it says. Thus as he studies the text in its context, he will necessarily employ the lexical and grammatical tools of the trade, as well as respected commentaries. And during his careful study he will assess the text’s place in the context of the book, discerning its contours, central theme, and meaning to the original audience. Throughout the process, the preacher will have been reflecting on the text through the lens of redemptive history, discerning how it reveals Jesus Christ and making the appropriate intra-canonical connections.

All of this dovetails with the interface of exegesis and dogmatics as the preacher rummages through the treasure trove of his theologies for insights and wisdom that are beyond the range of exegesis. This might include insights such as the biblical coherence of textual themes that run throughout Scripture, enlightening summaries of how the text has been applied (or misapplied) over the centuries, brilliant theological observations, clarifying explanations, needed adjustments and corrections, memorable expressions of truth, and, of course, usable quotations.

What a beautiful interface takes place as the pastor writes his sermon, an interface between (1) the raw exposure to the texture and polychromatic light of the living Word, (2) the unfolding revelation of Jesus Christ from the axis of redemptive history, and (3) the deep

reservoirs from the millennia of theology. What is the result of this interface? Nothing less than the glorious preaching of the Word and the ongoing growth of pastor-theologians.

Doctrine in the Creeds and Catechisms of the Church

The History of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds

The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds developed out of the baptismal practices of the early church, where those being baptized customarily confessed their faith in response to a series of questions framed along Trinitarian lines. This pattern derived from the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19, where he told his disciples to baptize the nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The baptismal confessions growing out of this practice thus came to be associated with the apostles, although there is no evidence they ever composed a creed themselves. The Apostles' Creed as we know it today is an eighth-century version of a much older statement of faith, perhaps from the second century. The Nicene Creed, on the other hand, was probably composed at or soon after the First Council of Constantinople (a.d. 381). It was certainly in existence at the Council of Chalcedon (451) and was mistakenly attributed to the First Council of Nicaea (325), which produced a similar creed no longer in use. The Apostles' Creed belongs above all to the Western (Latin-speaking) wing of the ancient church. The Nicene Creed originated in the Eastern (Greek-speaking) wing and was not widely known in the West until the eighth century. In its Western form, which probably originated in Spain in the late sixth century, this creed states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (Latin filioque), an addition never accepted in the East.

The First Section: God the Father

Both creeds open with a short confession of God the Father, described as the Almighty and the Creator of heaven and earth. The term "Almighty" translates the Hebrew El Shaddai, which occurs frequently in the OT, and the Greek Pantokrator, which is found only once in the NT (2 Cor. 6:18) apart from the book of Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 21:22), although it expresses the divine sovereignty clearly fundamental to the biblical message as a whole. The reference to the Creator comes in the first instance from Genesis 1:1, but the Nicene Creed adds that he made "all things visible and invisible," a phrase taken from Colossians 1:16 to express an emphasis found more in the NT than in the Old (see Rom. 1:20; Heb. 11:3). That God himself is invisible was always the belief of Israel, but the creedal statement refers to spiritual creatures like angels, who appear in the OT without any explanation of their origin or nature.

The Second Section: God the Son

The second section of the creeds is the lengthiest, expounding the earthly mission of God the Son in great detail, because here, more than anywhere else, the Christian church stood apart from Judaism and other religions and philosophies of the time. The Nicene Creed is generally fuller in its christological affirmations than the Apostles' Creed, although the Nicene Creed only says that the Son "suffered and was buried," while the Apostles' Creed specifies that he "died," responding to the contention of some that he merely swooned on the cross and was resuscitated in the tomb.

Looking at the christological section in order, both creeds begin with the affirmation that Jesus is the only Son of God. The Nicene Creed elaborates by adding that he is the "only-begotten" Son (from a dated translation of John 1:14) and that his birth was eternal (John 1:1–3; Hebrews 1). As in all births, the offspring shares the nature of its parents, leading to the confession that the Son is God from God, Light from Light, and so on. The scriptural basis for this is principally the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1–14), but analogous statements can be found in Philippians 2:6; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:8–9; 1 John 2:8, and elsewhere in the NT. The creeds stress the fact that he was not made as a creature but was born from the Father, a doctrine implied by John 1:3; Colossians 1:15–17; and Hebrews 1:3 but contested in ancient times by those who refused to accept that God the Father could have an equal in the Son.

The creeds describe the incarnation of the Son by saying he was "conceived by the Holy Spirit" and "born of the Virgin Mary." That Mary was the mother of Jesus is clear from the Gospels (Matthew 1; Luke 1–2), and Matthew records that he was conceived by the Spirit in the womb of a virgin (Matt. 1:20). The virginal conception was prefigured in Isaiah 7:14, where the Hebrew world almah ("young woman") was translated as parthenos ("virgin") in the Greek version of the OT known as the Septuagint, which appeared two or three centuries before the birth of Jesus.

The creeds omit any mention of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus and move straight from his birth to his crucifixion, which they describe in terms taken from the Gospels. They are particularly concerned to insist on the historicity of the event, underlined by the confession that Jesus

was sent to his death “under Pontius Pilate,” the Roman governor of Judea (a.d. 26–36) whose actions are amply recorded by all four Evangelists. That he suffered and was buried is also clear from their narratives, as is the fact that he was dead before being taken down from the cross (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:46; John 19:33).

The most obscure and controversial statement in this section of the Apostles’ Creed is the statement that after his death he “descended into hell.” This confession appears to be based on 1 Peter 3:18–20, which says that Jesus went to preach to the souls imprisoned in the days of Noah. It is unclear how this should be understood, and the creeds do not elaborate. Some modern translations of the creeds change “hell” to “Hades” or “the dead,” a reminder that it is unclear where exactly Jesus went. On the other hand, the descent into hell reminds us that Christ suffered the penalty of sin for the elect (including damnation) and defeated the power of Satan (see Rev. 12:7–12), although this is not made explicit in the creeds themselves. Ephesians 4:8–9, a quotation from Psalm 68:18 that Paul amplified, may also support this doctrine, but its meaning is also hard to interpret.

From the descent of Christ into hell, the creeds pass immediately to his resurrection on “the third day,” which by inclusive reckoning is the Sunday following the crucifixion on Good Friday, the eve of the Sabbath. This was a key element in the apostles’ preaching, as can be seen from Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 24:7; and Acts 10:40. The resurrection itself is amply attested by the Gospels and was a cornerstone of the faith of the first Christians, as Paul reminded the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:3–19).

The ascension of Christ into heaven is recorded in Luke 24:50–51 and Acts 1:6–11, although it is not mentioned in the other Gospels. There is, however, a direct reference to it in Ephesians 4:8–10. His heavenly session “at the right hand of God” is taken primarily from Acts 2:33 and is well-attested elsewhere (Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 10:12; 1 Pet. 3:22). His return in glory to judge the living and the dead is mentioned in Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1; and 1 Peter 4:5, and is supported by 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, although it is not specifically mentioned in that text.

The Third Section: God the Holy Spirit

The third article of the creeds touches on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles’ Creed does not develop this doctrine, but the Nicene Creed follows the pattern of scriptural proof for the divinity of the Holy

Spirit presented by Basil of Caesarea (d. a.d. 379) in his book on the subject. Basil demonstrated that, according to the NT, the Spirit is addressed as Lord (2 Cor. 3:18); is the giver of life, a divine attribute (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6); proceeds from the Father (John 15:26); is worshiped and glorified along with the Father and the Son (Matt. 28:19); and has inspired the prophets, who spoke the Word of God (2 Pet. 1:21). The Western church came to believe that the Holy Spirit must proceed from the Son as well as the Father because he is the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6), but the Eastern church has always rejected that interpretation, preferring to read John 15:26 as implicitly excluding procession from the Son.

The last section of the creeds deals with particular aspects of the Christian life and may be regarded as an appendix to the section on the Holy Spirit. First is the church, which is one, holy, catholic (or “universal”), and apostolic. The unity of the church is clear from 1 Corinthians, where Paul attacks schismatic tendencies that had taken hold of the congregation there, and is also alluded to in Ephesians 4:16. The church’s holiness is mentioned specifically in 1 Peter 2:9 and assumed almost everywhere in the NT Epistles, which constantly reiterate the need for believers to lead holy lives as a witness to the church’s mission. Its catholicity (or universality) is attested by Acts 2:9–11; Galatians 3:28, and every passage that discusses the place given to non-Jewish believers. Its apostolicity is expressly stated in Ephesians 2:20, and the theme runs through the Acts of the Apostles and most of the NT Epistles, whose authority rests on their apostolic origin.

Following the statement on the church is one regarding baptism for the forgiveness of sins, stated explicitly in Acts 2:38 and alluded to elsewhere (see Matt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25). The resurrection of the body is the main theme of 1 Corinthians 15:35–58, and the everlasting life that follows is the promise held out to believers both in that passage and elsewhere (1 Thess. 4:17; Revelation 21–22).

Catechisms Used Today

The catechisms used in many churches today trace their origins to the sixteenth-century Reformation, when Protestants and then Catholics prepared them as a means of instruction for the young and for potential converts. Catechesis (as this instruction is called) goes back to the early church and was developed in the middle ages, when people were

expected to learn the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) and the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), along with the Apostles' Creed. After the Reformation, these texts were expounded at great length, and young people were expected not only to recite them but also to explain their meaning before being confirmed as members of the church. Martin Luther prepared two catechisms (longer and shorter ones) that he issued in a.d. 1529. He placed the Ten Commandments first, then the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and finally the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; the main difference between his two catechisms is the longer one's much more detailed explanations.

The Heidelberg Catechism, issued in a.d. 1563 and adopted by the Reformed Synod of Dort in 1618, covers much the same ground as Luther's Shorter Catechism, but it begins with a theological exposition, including the sacraments, before moving on to the Apostles' Creed and then the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. In 1648 the Westminster Assembly published two catechisms of its own, corresponding to Luther's longer and shorter versions, but following the order of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Larger Catechism (as the longer one is known) takes the Westminster Confession of Faith as its theological basis instead of the Apostles' Creed, and, like that confession, its statements are accompanied by proof texts from Scripture. The catechism then concludes with a detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. The Shorter Catechism, still used widely in Presbyterian churches today, is more concise and omits the scriptural proof texts, although it covers the same ground and in the same order. A notable feature of all these catechisms is their emphasis on the doctrine of the classical texts applied in the lives and behavior of believers.

Most of the historic Protestant confessions are still in use today, but the Roman Catholic Church has produced a lengthy modern catechism (1994) to replace earlier versions. Like its predecessors, it contains substantial sections on the creeds, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Scriptural sources for its teaching are often cited, usually accompanied by quotations from the church fathers and more recent papal and conciliar statements regarded as equally authoritative, particularly when scriptural support for the statements is lacking. In this respect it must be said that the Protestant

confessions conform more closely to the ancient creeds, which, like them, exclude any belief not attested by the Bible, their sole and supreme authority in matters of faith and doctrine.

Election

The doctrine of election has divided the church for many years, but disagreement does not entail unimportance. As the storyline of Scripture unfolds, it is evident that the triune God not only has planned all things from eternity (e.g., Eph. 1:11; cf. 1:4) but also is sovereignly effecting his plan by his actions in creation, providence, revelation, and redemption. Election, God's sovereign and gracious choice to redeem a people for himself and apply to them all that redemption entails, is a subset of his all-encompassing eternal plan.

The Purposes of the Doctrine of Election

Given disagreements among Christians concerning election, there is a tendency to avoid discussion of the topic. The difficulty of this doctrine calls us to approach the subject humbly and carefully as we submit our minds and hearts to Scripture. It is also helpful to understand the doctrine as it functions in Scripture.

First, election leads believers to praise the triune God for his sovereign grace in choosing and placing us in Christ, our new covenant head and mediator (Eph. 1:4–6, 12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13). From beginning to end, God graciously initiates and chooses to redeem a fallen and undeserving people, and election underscores this fact.

Second, election grounds our confidence and comfort as Christians (Rom. 8:28–39). Why can we be assured that nothing will separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus? Part of the answer is that from eternity past, God the Father chose us in Christ, and by the work of the Son through the agency of the Spirit, we are assured that God's sovereign determination will never fail.

Third, election encourages us to evangelize (2 Tim. 2:10). Contrary to some thinking, election strengthens us by guaranteeing that God's chosen means of preaching the gospel will accomplish his planned end—the elect's salvation.

The Two Main Views of the Doctrine of Election

In historical theology there are two main views of election. First is the view of conditional election, which today is identified with

Arminianism. This view teaches that before time God foreknew who would respond to the gospel because of his prevenient grace at work in all people, which takes away their inability to believe, and that God chooses individuals on the basis of their foreknown faith. Today a corporate version of this view has arisen. Instead of arguing that God elects specific individuals on the basis of their foreknown faith, it claims that God elects Christ and the corporate entity of the church, which we place ourselves into by faith. In the end, the corporate view is a version of conditional election.

Second is the view of unconditional election associated today with Calvinism and Reformed theology. This view teaches that God, in eternity past, solely on the basis of his own good pleasure and gracious choice—not on the basis of any foreknown faith—chose undeserving individuals unto salvation. Because of our identification with Adam and our own sinful choices (Rom. 5:12–21; Eph. 2:1–3), apart from the Father's choice to elect us and apply Christ's work to us by the Spirit, we would not believe.

The two views have different theological conceptions of the impact of sin on the human will, the nature of prevenient grace, the question of divine justice and fairness and its relation to sin, and the plan of God in relation to foreknown creaturely actions. Additionally, these views differ on whether election itself is God's gracious choice or whether, after having established the condition of faith for election, God responds by electing all those who, by means of their choice, believe in the gospel. Unconditional election affirms the former, conditional election the latter.

Four Truths Point to Election as Unconditional

First, God has an eternal, comprehensive plan (Ps. 135:6; 139:16; Isa. 14:24–27; 46:9–11; Dan. 4:34–35; Acts 2:23; 17:26; Eph. 1:4, 11; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:20), including his own choice of specific individuals to salvation while allowing the others to go their own way and thus not experience salvation in Christ (Deut. 7:7–10; 10:14–15; Ps. 33:12; Matt. 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Luke 18:6–8; John 6:37–40; Rom. 8:28–33; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 1:1; 1 John 4:19; Rev. 17:14). In other words, the triune God foreordains all things, but in

that plan is an asymmetrical relationship between God's electing some to salvation and his leaving others in their state of sin and condemnation, known as reprobation. Election should be viewed corporately (e.g., God chose the nation of Israel for his redemptive purposes; Deut. 4:37; 7:6–7; 10:15; Rom. 9:1–5), but this does not negate the fact that election is God's choice of individuals to salvation (see Paul's argument in Romans 9–11, especially 9:6–9, 14–18; 11:1–6, and his use of the singular and his distinguishing true believing Israel from national nonbelieving Israel).

Second, election is God's choice due to sovereign grace and triune agency. Ephesians 1:3–14 beautifully teaches this point, especially verses 4–6. Paul teaches that "before the foundation of the world" (v. 4) the Father chose us, that is, specific individuals—the elect—in Christ. Why did he do this? What was the goal of our election? It was our redemption. The Father chose us to rescue us from our sin and guilt and give us redemption in Christ (vv. 7–10). He chose us in our fallen state to be "holy and blameless before him" (v. 4) and become his adopted sons in Christ Jesus (v. 5). What was the basis of our election? It was not our foreknown faith but the Father's love for us—"in love he predestined us" (vv. 4–5)—based ultimately upon "the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved" (vv. 5–6).

Third, God's election of individuals is unconditional. Our election is not based upon any foreknown faith (Rom. 9:10–13, 15–16; 10:20; 1 Cor. 1:26–29; Eph. 1:11–12; 2:8–10; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; 2 Tim. 1:8–10; 1 Pet. 1:1–2). Underneath this teaching are two biblical truths. First, God's plan is a result of his free choice and will (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 40:10–14; 46:9–11; Rom. 11:33–36; Eph. 1:5–6, 9, 11). Second, given the nature of human sin and its impact on us, apart from God's sovereign and gracious choice we, as fallen and rebellious people, would never respond to him. Instead, we would gladly choose to go our own way (Gen. 6:5–6; 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:21–23; John 3:3; Rom. 8:7–8; Eph. 2:1–3). Some have appealed to the use of foreknowledge in Romans 8:28–30 to justify a conditional view. However, in this context it is best to view foreknowledge as God's setting his love upon us. Thus when God foreknows us, it means he has loved us before we were ever born (Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2, 20).

Fourth, we come to know God's election only when we repent and believe (Acts 13:48; Rom. 10:13–15a; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; 2 Pet. 1:5–11; 1 John 4:19). Election does not negate the necessity for repentance and faith; it establishes the possibility of both. Furthermore, in our Christian lives God's election of us does not make us inactive but active as the Spirit of God works in us to conform us to Christ, our covenant head with whom we are now in union (Phil. 2:12–13; cf. Rom. 6:1–14).

As contentious as the theological debate over the doctrine of election is, in Scripture and in our lives election functions to assure us of God's incredible love for us, that salvation is wholly an act of grace, and that in Christ all of God's promises to us are Yes and Amen (2 Cor. 1:20). Our appropriate response should be gratitude, worship, love, and glad and willing obedience to our gracious and sovereign God.

Eschatology

"'Surely, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen" (Rev. 22:20–21). The Bible ends its masterful story with these words. Moving from creation to fall to redemption, the Bible points to the consummation, the coming grand finale of history. Eschatology is the study of the unfolding of God's plan in history, especially the destiny of humans and the world.

While eschatology focuses on the future, it is rooted in the past and relates to the entire biblical story. Creation is for God's purposes. Human beings are created in the image of God to know and serve him and to rule his creation for his purposes (Gen. 1:26–31). In the fall, humans rebelled against God's reign, and the domain of sin and death ensued (Genesis 3). Thankfully, God's gracious promises were revealed to Abraham in a covenant, in which God called a people to himself, promised to bless them, and promised to bless all peoples of the earth through them (Gen. 12:1–3). The promises made to Abraham were expanded in God's covenant to David, in which God promised David a son, a throne, and an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12–16). These promises looked forward to a new covenant marked by forgiveness of sins, the law written on believers' hearts, and new life (Jer. 31:31–34).

The NT makes clear that the promised Messiah came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Through his incarnation, ministry, teaching, sinless life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit, Jesus fulfilled the messianic promises, accomplished the messianic mission, and provided salvation for a lost world. The NT also declares that Jesus will come again to reign as King, bringing peace, joy, and righteousness. The kingdom is not primarily a geographic area but a people governed by the will of Jesus their King. The kingdom is something believers enter, experience, and affirm. It is a present reality for the people of Jesus and a future promise linked to the second coming of Christ.

Death

Individual eschatology is situated in this broader context. Sooner or later, until the Lord returns, all humans will die (Heb. 9:26–28). Physical death is variously represented in Scripture. It is spoken of as the

death of the body, as distinguished from the soul (Matt. 10:28), or as the separation of body and soul. Never is it spoken of as annihilation, but rather as the termination of physical life.

According to Scripture, however, death is not merely a biological phenomenon but is also a consequence of disobedience to the command of God (Gen. 2:16–17; Prov. 8:35–36). For humans it is an expression of divine anger, a judgment on sin (Rom. 6:23). Adam's sin brought death upon not only himself, but also his descendants (Rom. 5:12–21). Death ultimately has been defeated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54–57).

The immaterial aspect of believers, known as the soul or spirit, will at death be made perfect in holiness and pass immediately into glory (2 Cor. 5:5–9; Phil. 1:21–24; Heb. 12:23). The body, the material portion, remains in the grave after death until the final resurrection (1 Thess. 4:14). At death the soul consciously rests in the presence of God or in torment until the body is raised. Then the whole person exists eternally in a condition established by God's just and righteous judgment. Those who suffer are punished according to the degree of divine truth they refused (see Matt. 11:21–22). Those glorified with Christ receive his inheritance as a gift and will dwell in the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21–22).

The Resurrection of the Dead

Scripture teaches that at the return of Christ all the dead will be raised (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; 1 Corinthians 15). The resurrection will be a bodily redemption similar to the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15). Both the righteous and the wicked will be raised. The reunion of body and soul will issue in the penalty of eternal death for the wicked and deliverance and glorification forever for the righteous.

The Return of Christ

Throughout the history of man, people have sought, worked, and died attempting to bring about peace and justice on the earth. The church's responsibility is to work for and pray for peace and justice on earth, but ultimate peace and justice are precluded by the sinfulness of humanity. Only when God's rule and reign come to full manifestation will

history know true peace. It is to the return of Christ that the church has expectantly looked since his ascension (Acts 1:9–11).

Jesus Christ came first in the form of a servant. He will return as the judge of all mankind (John 5:24–27; 1 Thess. 5:1–3). At the first coming, Christ inaugurated his kingdom; at his second coming, he will consummate his kingdom. The second coming will be physical and personal, as were his resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:10–11).

The coming of Christ will be immediately preceded by a cosmic and terrestrial distress (Luke 21:25–27). Christ's return will bring a judgment upon the world that is sudden, unexpected, and inescapable (Matt. 24:42–44). The antichrist figure will arise prior to the second coming. He will be decisively overthrown (2 Thess. 2:8).

The kingdom of God, his rule and reign, will be consummated and fully established at the return of Christ. In some sense, Christ's redemptive kingdom is already realized in his church through the hearts and lives of his people (Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13). Yet it is not fully realized throughout the earth and awaits the fullness of his kingship (Isa. 11:9; Rom. 8:18–27; Rev. 20:1–6). There is debate about whether that fullness will precede or coincide with the final, eternal state after the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth (Isaiah 65; Revelation 21).

A great outpouring of God's grace will occur in the end times as the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world (Matt. 24:3–31; Rom. 11:25–36). Christians throughout history agree that Christ will come again physically and visibly, and the church's hope is focused on him. Though believers have differed over the meaning of the millennium (Rev. 20:1–6), they have nevertheless agreed that the rule and reign of God on earth will be expressed completely as God's victory over sin, evil, Satan, and death is accomplished.

The Final Judgment

The teaching of the resurrection leads to the throne of final judgment. In the first coming of Christ, he came as Savior; in his second coming, he will return as Judge of all mankind (John 12:47–48; Acts 17:31). God's judgment will come according to the standard revealed in God's Word and will vary based upon the revelation available to different

groups of people (Matt. 11:20–24). Those who have not heard the gospel, the heathen, will be judged by the law of nature and conscience (Rom. 2:12); Jews, by the OT law (Rom. 2:17–28). Those who have not responded to the full gospel revelation will be judged by it (Rom. 3:19–20). God will give every person his or her due. Every individual of the human race will appear before the judgment seat (Matt. 25:32; Rev. 20:12). Satan and demons will be judged (Matt. 25:41; Jude 6), and forgiven believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be judged for their works (2 Cor. 5:10).

The Eternal State

The last judgment assigns the final state of those who appear before the judgment seat. Their final state is one of either everlasting misery and separation from God or eternal blessedness. In the final state the wicked are consigned to the condemnation of hell, a place of punishment, banishment, and death (Matt. 25:31–46; 2 Thess. 1:5–10; Rev. 20:11–15; 21:8). The wicked will for all eternity be deprived of divine favor and will suffer punishment for sins.

The final state of believers will be preceded by the judgment of the world and the establishment of a new creation. The abode of the righteous will be prepared by Christ and will involve the establishment of the new heavens and new earth (John 14:2; Revelation 21–22). In the eternal state, creation itself will be freed from the effects of sin and the curse upon the earth (Genesis 3; Rom. 8:18–23; Rev. 22:3). This fullness of life will be enjoyed in communion with God, the essence of eternal life (John 17:3; Rev. 21:3). All in that state will enjoy perfect bliss. In sum, Christ’s return leads to judgment and then to the eternal state: condemnation for the wicked and eternal bliss for believers as God’s eternal glory is manifested in his victorious rule and reign.

God

God is the main subject of the Bible. Although it teaches about many other subjects along the way, everything Scripture includes can ultimately be traced to God's will to save fallen humanity in a way that shows his glory conspicuously and makes him known intimately.

The Trinity

From beginning to end, the Bible is the story of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit (Deuteronomy 6; Matt. 28:18–20; John 16–17). As we read the Bible, we discover that in the fullness of time the Father sent forth his Son and Holy Spirit (John 14–16; Gal. 4:4–6) for salvation and revelation. The Son and the Spirit are of the same essence as the Father and have coexisted with him in perfect unity for all eternity. Thus the God attested to in Scripture is the one God who shows himself always to have been three persons in one being.

God's Attributes

The Bible describes God as one, yet he bears multiple attributes, which are intrinsic, eternal qualities constituting who he is. God is so perfectly one that his attributes all interpenetrate and mutually imply each other. Thus calling him "good" does not imply that he meets some external standard of "goodness"; he himself is goodness, and displays it perfectly. The same can be said of all his perfections. But while they cannot be separated (as if God could be holy but not loving, or transcendent but not immanent), they can be considered individually.

Theologians often classify God's attributes as either incommunicable or communicable. God's incommunicable attributes are those he does not share or "communicate" to others, such as his self-existence, eternity, immutability, spirituality, infinity, omniscience, and so forth. These often relate to the uniqueness of God as compared to humans. For example, God is self-existent, while humans are creatures. God is eternal; humans are time bound. God is immutable; humans change.

God's communicable attributes are intrinsic to God's very nature as well, yet they can and should be displayed in humans; these include his love, goodness, mercy, grace, patience, truthfulness, integrity, moral holiness, righteousness, and so forth. Through union with Christ these attributes are shared with his people, so the church is to be increasingly marked by holiness, love, truth, and the other communicable attributes. In Exodus, God himself recites some of these attributes in a list (Ex.

34:6–7) that seems to be an explication of his own revealed name, which he states twice at the beginning: “The Lord, the Lord.” He then names a number of his perfections (“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”), followed by the characteristic actions he takes based on who he is (“keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”), and concluding with a counterbalancing statement of his abiding righteousness (“but who will by no means clear the guilty”).

God’s Self-Sufficiency and Glory

The Christian doctrine of God’s perfections preserves the dynamic of passages like this, which display who he is for our salvation, while tracing those actions back into the eternal life of who he essentially is and has been from eternity. To put it hypothetically, because of how God acts when he creates and redeems us, we know how God would have been even if he had never done these outward actions. So Christians confess that God has absolute self-sufficiency (aseity). Nothing he does is done out of need or greed, as if he could gain or lack anything. This self-sufficiency also determines how we talk about God’s relation to time and space, which do not limit him in any way, nor is he shut out from any part of them. God’s moral perfections are the ones clearest in Scripture and most characteristic of his identity: goodness, love, mercy, holiness, righteousness, and jealousy. All of the divine perfections considered together shine forth a radiance summarized by the word glory.

This same unity of all his perfections is experienced by God himself as blessedness, or perfect happiness. The doxology in 1 Timothy 6:15–16 is a good example of how these perfections are praised together: God is “blessed” and the “only Sovereign,” exalted over all powers (“King of kings and Lord of lords”), the only source and ground of everlasting life (“who alone has immortality”), and inaccessible to creaturely scrutiny (“who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see”). Glory and eternal lordship are ascribed to him.

Our Salvation

Throughout the OT, God indicated in various ways that he himself would be the salvation of his people (“he has become my salvation”; Ex. 15:2). When the Father sent the Son to become incarnate and the Holy Spirit to indwell the redeemed, he fulfilled his promise in a surprising way. “God with us” meant the Father sending the Son and the Spirit, who are more

than created agents—they are fully God. The incarnation and Pentecost are not merely the next mighty acts of God in a sequence but are the central events of salvation history that make known the Trinity's presence among us.

These two persons within the unity of God had not previously been revealed with such clarity and distinctness; in the OT they were glimpsed, hinted at, or adumbrated (literally, "shadowed forth"). But once they appeared as themselves in salvation history, they had to be recognized as having always existed. The fact that they were sent, though being fully equal with the Father, can be traced to the fact that, within the divine life of the living God, the Son and the Spirit stand eternally in a relationship of being from the Father (as opposed to holding a status lower than the Father's, as the heresy of Arianism taught). These eternal processions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are the basis of their missions into the history of salvation.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The result of understanding how the Son and the Spirit stand in relation to the Father is the doctrine of the Trinity: the one God eternally exists as three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This formula, combining the three persons in this order, was given directly by the Lord Jesus (Matt. 28:19), though the key words normally used to explain the doctrine do not themselves appear in Scripture: person, essence, relation, or even Trinity. What matters, of course, is that the ideas they point to are biblical. As long as that is established, we are free to use the enormously helpful terms we have inherited from ancient Christian usage. The doctrine of the Trinity can be broken down into a handful of truth claims, each of which can be demonstrated from Scripture: there is one God; the Father is God, as are the Son and the Spirit; the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Spirit, nor the Spirit the Father; and so on.

Adoption and the Trinity

The most important immediate implication of God's existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit lies in the understanding of salvation. Christian salvation is adoption into the family of God, an event in which the eternally begotten Son of God brings those whom he is not ashamed to call brothers, through union with him, into his filial relationship with the Father. This happens through the atonement in Christ and the indwelling Spirit of adoption in the redeemed. It is no surprise that salvation

becomes clearer and deeper when understood in light of the Trinity.

Remember that God did not clearly reveal his triunity in advance of sending the Son or the Holy Spirit; the revelation of the Son and Spirit was directly tied to the event of their coming in person to accomplish and apply salvation. The revelation of this interpersonal depth in God, in other words, was bundled with redemption. The doctrine of the Trinity is thus the result of a thorough understanding of the nature of the gospel, drawing out the implications of what the gospel is and what it entails about the God who is its source. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity answers the question of who God is according to the good news of salvation in Christ. It is the Christian doctrine of God.

The Gospel

The gospel is the gloriously great good news of what our triune God has graciously done in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath against us and secure the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness for all who trust in him by faith alone. Christ fulfilled, on our behalf, the perfectly obedient life under God's law that we should have lived but never could. He died the death we deserved to suffer but now never will. And by his rising from the dead, he secures for believers the promise of a resurrected and glorified life in a new heaven and a new earth in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever.

But what is it that makes the gospel something more than news? Why is it good news? Indeed, why is it better news than anything else you might discover? Could it be that the biblical gospel is in fact the very best news imaginable? Clearly yes, and here is why.

The Gospel Is True

The gospel is fundamentally about something that has happened. It is an accomplished event, an unalterable fact of history. Nothing can undo the gospel. No power in heaven or earth can overturn or reverse it. As a settled achievement, it exerts radical and far-reaching influence into both our present experience and our future hopes. The glory of what God has already done in and through Jesus transforms everything now and yet to come. This gospel is not only the means by which people have been saved but also the truth and power by which people are being sanctified (1 Cor. 15:1–2); it is the truth of the gospel that enables us to do genuinely and joyfully what is pleasing to God and grow in progressive conformity to the image of Christ. Thus we must never think the gospel is solely for unbelievers. It is for Christians at every stage of their lives. There is nothing in the Christian life that is "post-gospel"!

The Gospel Is Central

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the gospel is the gravitational center of both our individual experience and local church life. We see this in numerous biblical texts. For example, the gospel is

Christocentric—it is about Jesus, God's son (Mark 1:1; Rom. 1:9). Both Mark (Mark 1:14) and Paul (Rom. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:2) describe it as the gospel "of God" insofar as he is its source and the cause of all it entails. Humans do not create or craft the gospel: they respond to it by repenting of their sins and believing its message (Mark 1:15) concerning what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The gospel, then, is the "word of truth" proclaiming our "salvation" (Eph. 1:13). It is marked by grace (Acts 20:24)—it is the message of God's gracious provision, apart from human works, of everything necessary to reconcile us to himself both now and for eternity. Indeed, the gospel is the foundation, pattern, and power for how we respond to unjust suffering (1 Pet. 2:18–25; 3:17–18), the way we relate to our spouses (Eph. 5:22–33), how we use our money (2 Cor. 8:8–9; 9:13), the manner in which we forgive those who have sinned against us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), and the zeal with which we serve others (Mark 10:43–45; 1 John 3:16–18). This good news of what God has done in and through Christ's death (1 Cor. 2:2) and resurrection (2 Tim. 2:8) brings peace (Eph. 6:15), life, and immortality (2 Tim. 1:10) to those who receive it.

These truths are of paramount and eternal importance, for to "distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7) or preach one that is "different" or contrary to what the apostles made known (v. 6) is to come under a divine curse (v. 9).

The Gospel Is Transformative

So, how does the gospel change us? Of what practical, daily importance is it? Many Christians live in an "if-then" relationship with God. If I do what is right, then God will love me. If I give more money to missions, then God will provide me with a raise at work. If I avoid sinful habits, then I will be spared suffering and humiliation. The gospel calls us instead to live in a "because-therefore" relationship with the Lord. Because we have been justified by faith in Christ, therefore we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Because Christ died for us, therefore we are forgiven. Because Christ has fulfilled the law in our place, therefore we are set free from its demands and penalty. Instead of a conditional relationship based on merit, the gospel is an unconditional relationship

based on grace.

Five Truths about the Gospel

If we are to understand the gospel rightly, we must keep in mind five foundational truths.

First, the gospel is rooted in the call of Israel and is consummated in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the fulfillment of the types and shadows of the old covenant. As such, the gospel must never be thought of as an abstract, ahistorical idea, as if it were disconnected from or unrelated to the concrete realities of life on earth. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are thus to be seen as the pivotal chapter in the unfolding story of God's redemptive purpose for humanity.

Second, the gospel is not what God requires. The gospel is what God provides. There is, of course, an intrinsic demand built into the gospel. The good news that is proclaimed calls for a response of faith and repentance. But our faith and repentance are not themselves the gospel. Our personal testimony is not the gospel. We cannot be the gospel, but we bear witness to it.

Third, the gospel is not an imperative, demanding things you must do. The gospel is an indicative, declaring things God has done. Again, of course, we do things because of the gospel. But our doing things is not itself the gospel.

Fourth, the gospel is not about human action. The gospel is about divine achievement. Or again, the gospel is about God's provision, not man's response. The gospel is not a moralistic Do! The gospel is a merciful Done! There are undoubtedly multiple consequences of the gospel extending beyond its impact on the individual and his relationship to God. The gospel invariably issues a call for human action. Among the implications or results of the gospel are the cultivation of humility (Phil. 2:1–5), the pursuit of racial reconciliation (Eph. 2:11–22) and social justice (Philem. 8–20), a commitment to harmony and peace among men (Rom. 15:5–7; Heb. 12:14), and the demonstration of love for another (1 John 3:16, 23). But we must never confuse the content of the gospel with its consequences, or its essence with its entailments.

Fifth, whereas the gospel is God’s redeeming act in Jesus on behalf of sinful men and women, we must not overlook the fact that it is only because of the gospel that we have a sure and certain hope for cosmic transformation. The good news of God’s saving act in Christ is thus the foundation for our confidence in the ultimate triumph of God’s kingdom (1 Cor. 15:20–24), the end of physical death (1 Cor. 15:25–26; Rev. 21:4), the defeat of Satan (John 16:11; Col. 2:13–15; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8), the eradication of all evil (Rev. 21:4, 8), the removal of the curse resting on our physical environment, and the consummation of God’s purpose for all creation in the new heavens and new earth (Rom. 8:18–25).

Good news indeed!

Grace

An old acrostic explains grace as “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” A more common definition is “unmerited favor.” Both are helpful in expressing the Bible’s wide-ranging use of a term central to its gospel message.

One of the reasons grace pervades so much of Scripture is that it is essential to the character of God. His own description of himself (Ex. 34:6–7) includes the attribute of graciousness, and no description of God is repeated more often in the Bible (e.g., Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:31; Ps. 86:5; 15; Joel 2:13). Not only is grace rooted in God’s character, but it is also expressed in his actions toward all he has made (Ps. 145:8–9). Where God is, grace exists in abundant supply.

God Provides What We Cannot

Because grace is a provision of God’s riches, it is necessarily something that blesses God’s people beyond their own means. Grace evidences some aspect of divine provision.

Scripture discloses God’s provision for people in a variety of ways, but it is important to understand that his gracious character is not fully presented in one snapshot. The nature of grace unfolds over biblical history. In its simplest expression, grace is evident whenever God feeds the hungry, grants rest to the weary, gives strength to the weak, provides family to an orphan, sends funds to the destitute, forgives a sinner, loves the unlovely, releases a slave, rescues the captive, and so forth. In each of these, God provides a blessing people cannot provide for themselves (Isa. 40:29–31; 2 Cor. 12:9–10; Heb. 11:34).

The grace of God in these small, personal vignettes also sweeps in large scale across biblical history. Grace works across millennia as God provides his people with his unfailing love, faithful Word, needed leaders, repeated rescues, fatherly discipline, release from slavery, return from exile, relief from famine, maintenance of a remnant, willingness to forgive, providential deliverance, electing covenants, messianic promises, and so forth. Each provision is beyond humanity’s ability, supply, or deserving. So, by these historical provisions, God not only defines his nature but also points toward the greater grace all people

need him to provide (Rom. 15:4, 8–13).

God Provides What He Requires

By his grace God not only provides what his people need; he also provides what his kingdom requires. He is not merely gracious by nature; he is also holy. In order for his people to be united to him in spirit and for eternity, they must also be holy. God specifically says to them, “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16; cf. Lev. 19:2). This is a requirement far beyond the supply of humans sinful by nature (Rom. 5:12–13). We can no more make ourselves holy than a man could clean a white shirt with muddy hands. So, by his grace, God provides what he requires.

Holiness

God provides the holiness he requires of his people by the sacrificial gift of his Son (Rom. 5:6–10). That is why God’s riches are at Christ’s expense. Because our sinful nature keeps us from meeting the requirements of holiness, God determined to provide his Son in sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sins. In order to maintain his justice, God could not simply disregard the sin of humanity that dishonors him, damages others, and degrades us. But if we were to pay the just penalty for our sin, hell would be our recompense.

God graciously provides another destiny for his people by allowing Christ’s perfect sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sin. In essence, God paid the fine his own justice required for our transgression (Rom. 3:26). As a consequence, we can be in a relationship with him, since he provides what he requires (1 John 4:9–10). With sin’s penalty fully paid, God’s people stand justified before him. They possess the holy status he requires by virtue of the sacrifice he provided (Gal. 2:20; 1 John 3:1).

God thus graciously both pays the penalty for his people and provides to them the benefits of that payment. Christ’s sacrifice for sin is not forced upon all humanity. Neither is it earned by some superhuman accomplishment (Titus 3:5). Again, grace provides what we need but cannot provide for ourselves.

Faith

Since grace cannot be earned and is not deserved, it can be

claimed only by faith (Rom. 3:21–23). Those who believe Christ's sacrifice provides the penalty for their sin trust God to forgive and bless them solely on the basis of Jesus' work on their behalf (Gal. 2:16). They rest on the truth of the sufficiency of his sacrifice and receive his righteous status as their sole claim to holiness (Rom. 5:2; Col. 3:4).

But from where does this faith come? In their sinful state, all humans are dead in their transgressions and sin (Eph. 2:1). They have no spiritual ability to express the faith God requires. So, again, God provides what he requires (Eph. 2:4–5). He puts his Holy Spirit in our hearts to make them alive to the truths of the gospel, as well as willing and able to rest in and receive it (Rom. 8:3–6). He instills within us the faith we must express to have the holy status he requires (Eph. 2:8–9).

Power

God requires holiness not just in status but in life (2 Cor. 6:14–18). He calls his people to live and grow in ways that honor him and bless others (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 5:1–2; 2 Pet. 3:18). But we remain remarkably human, with weak wills, divided hearts, and distracted minds. So how do we live as God requires? Again, he provides what he requires (1 Cor. 1:30). He puts the same Spirit in us that raised Jesus from the dead so that the resurrection power of the Savior indwells our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:5–11; 1 John 4:4). We no longer are slaves to sin, and it no longer has dominion over us (Rom. 6:6, 14).

Motivation

But what, then, enables and encourages us to act on the power and liberty we have to serve God? The answer, again, is grace. The grace that saves and empowers us creates affections in us (2 Cor. 5:14; 2 Pet. 1:3–4) to displace the worldly desires that would lure us into sin (John 3:19; James 1:13–14). God provides the life of holiness he requires by giving us the willingness and the ability to serve him (Titus 2:11–12).

Perseverance

Finally, as the old song says, "'Tis grace will lead us home." In our own strength, we could never maintain the affections and devotion that would secure our path to heaven. So God also provides what he

requires eternally: a bond that extends into glory (1 Pet. 1:13). He requires our hearts to remain firmly set on him, and he provides the means for that to occur by securing us to himself (Rom. 8:28–30, 38–39).

Everything Necessary

Mystery remains in the divine equations of how God provides what we are responsible to express in faith, faithfulness, and perseverance. But there is no mystery in the reality that all of these are beyond us if God does not provide grace for the holiness, faith, and life he requires (Heb. 4:16; 1 Pet. 1:10).

The Holy Spirit

The Deity of the Holy Spirit

Jesus likened the Holy Spirit to the wind (John 3:8). This famous image of the Spirit signals mystery. Indeed, the Hebrew word ruakh can be translated “spirit” or “wind,” as can the Greek word pneuma. Yet the Spirit is no mere impersonal force or influence. The Spirit prays (Rom. 8:26–27)—only persons can pray. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is God, the third person of the Holy Trinity. The baptismal formula at the end of Matthew’s Gospel makes this plain. According to Jesus himself, baptism is to be practiced in the one name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18–20). This text would be incoherent if the Spirit were not personal and as much God as the Father and Son are.

The book of Acts provides further evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can be lied to, and to lie to the Spirit is to lie to God (Acts 5:3–5). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is the searcher of the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:9–11) and knows the mind of God. Only God can know God, as Basil of Caesarea pointed out in the fourth century (On the Holy Spirit 16.40, 24.56). Only omniscience can know omniscience. The early church judged regarding the one God that the Spirit is to be worshiped and glorified along with the Father and Son, as the Nicene Creed says. Only God is to be worshiped.

The Holy Spirit in the OT

In the very first chapter of Genesis, God is the great worker who accomplishes his will by his word and Spirit. The Spirit implements the divine purposes in both nature and history (Gen. 1:2; Zech. 4:6). The Spirit sustains life in God’s creatures (Ps. 104:30). Sadly, sin is at work in God’s good creation (Genesis 3). But God has a project to reclaim creation and end its spoiling. The nation of Israel is vital to that project. As Jesus said, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

Again working by his word and Spirit, God has created a people for himself, with the whole world ultimately in mind (Gen. 12:1–3; Ex. 19:5–6). The Spirit was involved in the work of leaders like Moses (Num. 11:17), artisans like Bezalel (Ex. 31:1–5), judges like Gideon (Judg. 6:34), prophets like Elijah (1 Kings 18:12), and kings like David

(Ps. 51:11).

Like Adam before it, however, Israel failed to image God. But the God who makes and keeps promises is not defeated by human failure. Israel's prophets speak of a future day in which God will give his people a new heart and put a new spirit within them (Ezek. 18:31; 36:26–27). All of God's people will experience this, not just a few (Joel 2:28–32). And it will be a Spirit-anointed servant (messiah) of the divine will who will be the key agent accomplishing this mission (Isa. 42:1–4; 48:16; 61:1–3).

The Holy Spirit in the NT

In the NT, Jesus proves to be the promised Spirit-anointed Messiah. In relation to Christ's mission, the Spirit's person and work come into far greater prominence than in the OT era (John 7:39). The Messiah's ministry cannot be understood apart from the Spirit's empowering. And so we find the Spirit involved in Christ's miraculous conception (Luke 1:35), baptism (Luke 3:21–22), temptations (Luke 4:1–2), preaching (Luke 4:14–15), mighty works (Matt. 12:28), death (Heb. 9:14), and resurrection (Rom. 8:11).

With the day of Pentecost, a great reversal takes place. The bearer of the Spirit under the direction of the Spirit in Luke 4:16–21 becomes the giver of the Spirit in Acts 2:1–36. The ascended and glorified Jesus, as the Lord and Christ at the right hand of the Father, pours out the Spirit promised in the OT (Acts 2:33). Thus Jesus fulfills the prophecy of John the Baptist. John baptized with water; Jesus baptizes with the Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:4–5).

Moreover, according to Jesus, the Spirit is the Paraclete (paraklētos, translated as "advocate," "comforter," "champion," or "counselor" depending on the context). As the Paraclete, the Spirit continues the work of Christ through his disciples as the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, even to Rome itself (John 14–16; Acts 28). Indeed, in Acts we see Pentecost extended as different groups get caught up in the Spirit's eschatological outpouring (Jews in 2:5, Samaritans in 8:14–17, Gentiles in 10:44–47, and John the Baptist's disciples in 19:1–7). Significantly, after Pentecost the Holy Spirit is not merely on the believer, as in OT times, but in the believer, as Jesus promised (John 14:17). The Spirit is the source of new life (Rom. 8:11). In

fact, through the Spirit and baptism, the risen Christ incorporates believers into his body (1 Cor. 12:13).

The Holy Spirit's Work in Believers

In the sixteenth century, John Calvin was right to argue that as long as Christ is outside of us, all his achievement provides us with no benefit; but if we are united with him, all that is his becomes ours. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings such a union about by his secret working (Institutes 3.1.1). The rule of salvation is the rule of real estate: location, location, location. The Spirit relocates us from being in Adam to being in Christ. Indeed, the same Spirit that animated Christ's humanity animates our own if we are members of his body, united to him.

NT faith is unintelligible apart from the Spirit's work in and through the church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). The Spirit endows Christ's ecclesial body with gifts to be exercised for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). Debate continues as to whether all the gifts of the Spirit continue into the present era (i.e., the sign gifts, especially speaking in tongues) or whether some were only for the establishment of the church at the very beginning. Importantly, the church can be described not only as the body of Christ but also as God's temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16–17). What a difference it makes to think of the Christian gathering as a living temple of the Spirit rather than a concert auditorium or lecture hall.

The Holy Spirit can be sinned against. The Spirit may be grieved (Eph. 4:30), quenched (1 Thess. 5:19), and even blasphemed (Mark 3:20–30). This blasphemy against the Spirit—an unpardonable sin—appears to be settled unbelief concerning the Christ to whom the Spirit bears witness. The Spirit fills believers, so that they speak, act, and display godly virtues (Eph. 5:18–21). Significantly, the indwelling Spirit is the believer's seal and guarantee of a place with God in the new heavens and earth (Eph. 1:13–14). In fact, without the Spirit there is no real knowledge of God (1 Cor. 2:9–12). Unsurprisingly, then, the Holy Spirit's work as the Spirit of prophecy is vital to the story of Scripture and its inspiration (2 Tim. 3:14–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

The Spirit also plays a key role in the believer's assurance that he or she really is an adopted child of God and heir of the good

things God has in store for his family (Rom. 8:14–17). The Spirit enables believers to enter into the abba communion of the Son and Father (Gal. 4:4–7). If we cannot find the words for our anguished prayers, the Spirit becomes our intercessor (Rom. 8:26–27). Without the Spirit, we are left with no authentic Christian faith (Rom. 8:9) and cannot truly confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). Importantly, the Spirit enables access to the Father through the Son for both Jewish and Gentile believers who together form the temple of God in which God lives by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18–22). The person and work of the Spirit are cause for Christian celebration.

Humanity

In the first section of his Confessions, Augustine speaks directly to God, declaring, “You have made us for yourself, and we are restless until we find our rest in you.” Here we have a reference to both the beginning and the end of being human. The beginning is creation. The first matter in the doctrine of humanity is creation—human beings are created in the image of God. The end of being human is union and fellowship with the triune God. God made us to be his. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism famously puts it this way:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

We were made by and for God. The doctrine of humanity both begins and ends with God.

Augustine’s statement also points to the middle of being human. It points to the conflict of being human. Friedrich Nietzsche quipped that we are “human, all too human.” He was speaking of what has euphemistically come to be called the human condition. Theologically, we refer to this as the fall. The fall has caused our restlessness, our gnawing sense that something is wrong, that we are deeply broken. The middle of being human also includes the remedy to this conflict. The remedy is redemption, found only in the God-man, Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Paul refers to Adam as the first man, the proto-man, if you will (1 Cor. 15:45–49). Paul also refers to Christ as the last man, the eschatological man. That is to say not that Christ is chronologically the last man but that he in his human nature is, ultimately, the true human. And as the blessed promise woven throughout the pages of Scripture assures us, someday we will be fully like him in his glorified humanity (2 Cor. 3:12–19; 4:16–18; 5:17; 1 John 3:1–3).

These are the building blocks for the doctrine of humanity. In order to grasp the doctrine of humanity, we see humanity first as created in the image of God, second as fallen in Adam, third as redeemed in Christ, and fourth as destined either for eternal life in Christ or eternal death.

Created in the Image of God

In only three verses, Genesis 1:26–28, we learn that humanity is created in the image of God, created to work, created as male and female, and created to have dominion over creation. All of these define being human. Like other creatures, we are created beings. Unlike other creatures, humanity alone is created in the image of God. David reflects on this in Psalm 8. Against the backdrop of the grandeur and glory of God, as well as the vastness and even overwhelming majesty of creation (Ps. 8:1–3), God is mindful of and cares for human beings (Ps. 8:4).

We see this mindfulness of God toward humanity in that God created perfect conditions for humanity. Everything in his created world was not only good, but very good (Gen. 1:31). And as Adam and Eve cultivated the garden, they enjoyed their work and fellowship with God. They were doing what they were created to do.

Views on the image of God include the substantive view (the image has to do with who we are), the functional view (the image has to do with what we do), and the relational view (the image has to do with our capacity to relate to each other and to God). These are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We can gain insight into God's original intent for humanity by looking at all three.

In terms of the substantive view, even though we may be creatures, there is some analogy between us and God. As God possesses intelligence and morality, so we too are intelligent and moral creatures. In terms of the functional view, the image of God refers to what we do in our vocation. Some ancient Near Eastern cultures considered the king to be "in the image of God," meaning the king ruled in the place of the gods of that culture. The king was considered a vicegerent, one who ruled in the place of the gods. In the creation account, all of humanity is declared to be in God's image. Consequently, we can understand the image of God to refer to human beings as vicegerents, ruling in God's place and cultivating and exercising dominion over his creation. As Adam and Eve were called to cultivate the garden, so we are to cultivate, bring order to, and even create things of beauty in this world. The relational view of the image means we have the capacity to relate to God, again a capacity unique to human beings compared to the rest of

God’s creatures. Image-bearing was the task of Adam and Eve, and they originally did what they were created to do.

Fallen in Adam

Then came the conflict. The Serpent, revealed to be Satan as the Bible unfolds, tempts Eve, Eve succumbs and tempts Adam, and Adam falls (Gen. 3:1–13). The fellowship with God is broken, and the harmony and peace Adam and Eve enjoyed with each other is fractured. As the story unfolds, things go from bad to worse. Eve turned on Adam, but Cain would next slay Abel (Gen. 4:1–16). Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it well when he said this is not a fallen world, it is a fallen-falling world.

Part of the curse entailed the new reality of death (Gen. 2:17). Humanity is spiritually dead, alienated and separated from God (Eph. 2:1; Col. 1:21). Humanity is also frail and finite. Isaac Watts poetically expressed it this way: “Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons away” (cf. Ps. 90:3–10).

The fall also means we are now bound to sin. We refer to this as total depravity. Collective humanity is fallen, and all of us—in the entirety of our beings—are fallen (Rom. 5:12–21). Human beings, however, remain in the image of God (James 3:9). This is a delicate balancing act, but a crucial one. In order to have an accurate understanding of human nature, we must see human beings as both in the image of God and fallen, both possessing dignity and also depraved.

Redeemed in Christ

Adam, however, does not have the final word. Christ ultimately defines what it means to be human. The doctrine of the incarnation declares that Christ, who is fully God, became flesh, fully human (Luke 2:11–12; Gal. 4:4–7; Col. 2:9). The author of Hebrews stresses that Christ is like us in every respect, except without sin; Christ is our High Priest, touched with our infirmities (Heb. 2:14–18; 4:14–15). It is important to remember that, while we are redeemed, we are still touched by the human condition. Paul reminds us that God manifests his power and grace in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10; cf. Isa. 40:27–31). Christ himself experienced all dimensions of the human condition: hardship, betrayal, limitation, frailty, suffering, and ultimately death.

From 2 Corinthians 3:12 to 5:21, Paul stresses, among other things, our identity in Christ, the God-man. Unlike Adam, who is in the image of God, Christ is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). In redeeming us, Christ brings us from life to death (4:11), prepares us for an eternal glory far outweighing all afflictions of this life (4:16–18), takes us from being alienated from God to being reconciled to God (5:18–19), and takes our sin and gives us his righteousness (5:21). In Christ, we go beyond Adam and Eve in their originally created state. In Christ, we go beyond Eden to the new heavens and earth, worshiping and reigning with the triune God (Rev. 22:1–5).

Eternal Life, Eternal Death

Our relationship to God defines who we are as human beings. We are all, as human beings, created in his image. Our sin separates us from a holy God. We are fallen in Adam. The God-man, Christ, came to undo the sin of Adam. He also did what Adam could not—keep the law perfectly (Rom. 5:19). Christ succeeded where Adam failed. All those who believe in Christ are no longer in Adam but in Christ, heirs of eternal life (Heb. 9:24–28). We are redeemed in Christ. Those who deny Christ remain in Adam and will die not only physically but also eternally, separated and cut off from God forever (Matt. 13:41–43).

Augustine was right. God made us for himself, and he made us ultimately to enjoy and glorify him forever.

Ordinances and Sacraments

Ordinances and Sacraments

We have been created as bodily creatures from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7). We have not only minds but also five senses: hearing, sight, smell, touch, and taste. The God of the Bible is the God who addresses our entire person, including our senses. The Word of God addresses the ear when read aloud and the eyes when read silently. In both the OT and NT, God communicates in ways supplementing the spoken and written word. Ancient Israel had its annual feasts (e.g., Passover) and its sacrificial system centered in the temple at Jerusalem (e.g., burnt offerings). In the NT era, the body is not neglected. We have the gospel word dramatized—preached to our senses, as Augustine noted—in the ordinances or sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The term "ordinance" draws attention to how both practices are commanded by the Lord Jesus. They are not church inventions. The term "sacrament" draws attention to these two practices as means of grace. This is classically defined as an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" (1662 Book of Common Prayer).

Baptism

The NT describes a variety of baptisms. John the Baptist performed baptisms at the river Jordan, as did his disciples, and so too did the disciples of Jesus, even before the Great Commission was given (John 4:1–2). John's baptism was a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4), in preparation for the Messiah; it was not Christian baptism. Both Jesus and John the Baptist spoke of a coming baptism with the Spirit that would happen on the day of Pentecost (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:4–5). Jesus taught that baptism is part of being a disciple and making disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Peter commanded baptism (Acts 2:38), and Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch with Christian baptism in water when he came to faith in Jesus (Acts 8:35–38). The symbolism of baptism identifies and unites the subject with the death and resurrection of Christ, as the apostle Paul taught the church at Rome (Rom. 6:3–4). It symbolizes dying to an old life and turning to a new. It signals a change of mind and a change of direction. It also symbolizes entry into a new sphere of divine influence, just like baptism with the Spirit does. It is done once (Eph. 4:5).

In Acts we read of whole households being baptized in response to the gospel, as in the cases of Lydia and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:14–15, 30–34; cf. 1 Cor. 1:16). Whether infants and children were baptized on such occasions is much debated among Bible-believing Christians. Those holding to believer's baptism point to the NT evidence that people were baptized after believing the gospel. They regard baptism as the means by which people publicly confess Christ. Emphasizing the newness of the new covenant, they see no clear indication that the household passages included infants. They also hold that the words for baptism mean immersion and insist on that mode of baptizing believers. Those holding to infant baptism agree that pagan believers, such as we find in Acts, are to be baptized upon profession of faith. They view the household baptisms from the perspective of the OT and assume that Jewish Christians would apply to their infants the sign of the new covenant, even as Jews did in the OT. In principle they regard sprinkling, pouring, and immersion as valid modes of baptism, although in practice they usually prefer sprinkling.

Importantly, in the apostle Paul's mind preaching the gospel took priority over the practice of baptism. In fact, according to him, preaching the gospel was his apostolic task: "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). Some churches believe that, ordinarily, water baptism is necessary for a person's salvation. This is true of some holding to infant baptism, including Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, and some holding to believer's baptism, including Churches of Christ and Christian Churches. If this were so, it is hard to understand Paul's words to the Corinthians where, as we have just seen, Paul claims he was sent to preach, not baptize, and where he also states he could not remember at first whom he baptized (1 Cor. 1:14–16).

The Lord's Supper

Jesus not only left his disciples with a message (the gospel) and a mission (make disciples); he also left them with a meal (Luke 22:19–20). Unlike baptism, the Lord's Supper is repeated (1 Cor. 11:25). The practice draws attention to the sacrifice of Jesus on behalf of his people. Paul describes it in preaching terms (1 Cor. 11:26). The practice

is retrospective, looking back to the cross, and also prospective, proclaiming Christ's death until he returns.

In the early church, Augustine believed that the risen Christ preaches to our senses in the Lord's Supper. It was the Word made visible, as it were. But as the Reformers of the sixteenth century pointed out, without scriptural explanation the practice becomes a dumb ceremony (as Thomas Cranmer argued). What is clear from the NT witness is that abuse of the practice is not to be tolerated and carries a sober warning. Gluttony and lack of love at the Lord's Supper at Corinth were severely reprimanded by Paul. Some became weak and ill, and some even died, because in dining in gluttony and lack of love, they had ignored the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:30). Incidentally, the first Corinthian letter shows that the Lord's Supper was part of a bigger meal. The letter also shows how early Christians like Paul prized the actual words of Jesus (11:23–25).

Debate continues to surround what Paul means when he refers to discerning the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29). Does he mean that the presence of Christ is somehow mysteriously to be found at each celebration of the Lord's Supper in connection with the bread and wine? Or does he refer to how some believers were ignoring the needs of other members of Christ's body? Or is it some combination of both? On the second view, failing to discern the body is not a sacramental issue but an ecclesial one. For Paul, the Lord's Supper makes the unity of believers visible, or at least it should. The bread and cup are a spiritual participation, a sharing, in Christ's body and blood (10:16). The most profound meaning of Communion is thus union with Christ and partaking of him. From this vertical union flows horizontal union between believers (10:17). Divisions at the Supper were alarming to Paul and draw his condemnation (11:17–22).

Over time, the meal has come to be known by one aspect or another of NT testimony. It is a Eucharist or thanksgiving (1 Cor. 11:24). It is a Communion (10:16). It is the Lord's Table (10:21), and he is the Host. There is no indication in the NT as to how often such a meal is to take place or at what time of day. Nor is there any suggestion in the NT as to who might preside over it. There is no indication that the celebration of the Lord's Supper needs a priest of some kind. That idea came later.

What is clear is that the Lord's Supper took place in an intentional meeting of believers: "when you come together as a church" (11:18). It was no afterthought.

Historically speaking, evangelicals have not always agreed about what happens in the Lord's Supper when it comes to the details. For some, the accent has fallen on obeying a dominical ordinance in an act of remembrance. This is the memorialist tradition, often found in nonliturgical churches. For others, usually in liturgical churches, the emphasis falls on the Supper as a sacrament and therefore a means of grace. Lutherans, for example, argue that in a mysterious way Christ's body and blood are in, with, and under the bread and wine (consubstantiation). This was a dividing line between two great Reformers of the sixteenth century. Zwingli took the memorialist approach, whereas Luther argued for a real presence of Christ in the Supper. For Anglican evangelicals, the Supper is an effectual sign used by the Spirit to edify God's people. Those in the Reformed tradition have viewed the Supper as a means of grace too: the Spirit makes Christ real to the communicant through the proclaimed Word and the table. Evangelicals have rejected any notion that the bread and wine miraculously become the body and blood of Christ, as in Roman Catholicism's mass (transubstantiation). For evangelicals of all stripes, the Lord's Supper is a special time of fellowship with Christ and one another. In it we remember the sufferings of our Lord, proclaim the gospel, and anticipate his return.

Orthodoxy and Heresy

Orthodoxy means right doctrine or belief. In one very important sense it is essential to salvation. Although we are saved entirely by the grace of God, not on the basis of the correctness of our thinking, right views of God promote wonder, reverence, and love. Moreover, for future generations to believe in Christ, it is imperative that we guard the gospel without which no one can be saved (2 Tim. 1:14). Hosea bemoaned the fact that “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6). Israel’s idolatry had affected its whole national existence. False worship bred sinful practice. God is faithful; allegiance to him requires and entails attention to what is true and right. Ideas have consequences. Truth is healthy for both body and soul (1 Tim. 6:3). Worship is to be in truth, which is embodied in Jesus Christ (John 4:21–24; cf. 1:9, 14, 17–18; 14:6). True biblical orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy (right practice), which should promote healthy living and relationships.

Not All Orthodox Doctrine Is of the Same Weight

Some aspects of right doctrine are of vital importance, whereas others may be of lesser significance. This important distinction is best expressed by John Calvin (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4:1:12):

> Not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned . . . as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith. . . . Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? . . . But here I would not support even the slightest errors with the thought of fostering them. . . . But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions.

Heresy Must Be Distinguished from Error

At my former church, on one or two occasions close to Christmas we would play a game called “True, false, or heresy?” We would select lines from a range of hymns and carols, split the congregation into teams, and fire away. It was designed to keep people alert to what they may be singing and also served to teach the important distinction between heresy and error.

What Exactly Is Heresy?

Heresy is something that, if it were true, would falsify the Christian gospel. An example of heresy is the claim the church faced in the early centuries that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was not eternal or coequal with the Father but came into being at some point in time. In short, he was other than God. If this were so, we could not be saved. If Christ were less than God and not of the same being as the Father, he would not have been the true revelation of who God is. He could not have truthfully said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The gospel—and our salvation—was at stake in this issue.

How Does that Differ from Error?

Error is simply something that is not in accordance with Scripture. It does not necessarily entail falsification of the Christian gospel. It means that this or that pronouncement is wrong, without regard to the seriousness of the mistake. All heresy is error, but not all error is heresy.

An example of error is evident in answers to the question of whether Christ, on his return, will establish a reign on earth of one thousand years prior to the final judgment.

Premillennialists affirm this claim; amillennialists and postmillennialists deny it. It is hard to see how all three groups can be right on this issue. At least one must be wrong. May an error on a matter like this have consequences? Quite possibly. Does such an error negate the gospel of God’s grace in Christ? No.

Another instance where error is involved is an answer to whether the infant children of a professing believer or believers should be baptized. Some say yes; others say no. One of these groups is wrong. Both groups believe that bad consequences ensue from the other position, even if they are not of such a nature as to destroy the gospel.

From this we can see the seriousness of heresy. It goes far beyond error. It is an immediate threat to the faith. It follows from this that we should refrain from calling heretical a position with which we merely do not agree.

Examples of Heresies

Here are examples of heresies, together with a brief explanation of why each falls into this category.

In the Bible we find traces of Docetism in the claims refuted in 1 John. This was the idea that Christ’s humanity was not real but only apparent. If

this had been the case, we could not be saved. Man sinned; man must make atonement for sin. So John says that whoever teaches that Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh is not of God (1 John 4:1–6).

In Galatians, Paul opposes legalism in the teachings of the Judaizers. Why? By their insistence that the Gentiles be circumcised, these people were destroying grace. In effect, they claimed that salvation was in part dependent on actions that we perform (Gal. 2:21). Paul calls down a curse on them (Gal. 1:8–9).

Angel veneration may have been a problem in Colossae (Col. 2:18). Such veneration is idolatry. Paul insists that Christ is the image of God, the Creator and sustainer of all things—including all kinds of angels (Col. 1:15–20).

The following are a sample of teachings that emerged in postapostolic history that the church has determined to be heretical.

We have already referred to Arianism, a denial of the eternal deity of Christ and his indivisible union with the Father. Macedonianism followed soon after, a denial of the deity of the Holy Spirit. The church rejected this denial because if the Spirit were not God, he could not unite us to God in Christ, and thus we could not be saved (Rom. 8:10–16). Additionally, we would have been baptized into the name of the Father and the Son—both recognized as God—and the Spirit, who was alleged to be a creature. This would be idolatry (Matt. 28:18–20).

Apollinaris of Laodicea was judged a heretic since he held that Christ, while having a human body, did not have a human mind or soul. The church maintained that if the Son did not take into union human nature in its entirety, we could not be saved. Man sinned; man must atone (see Heb. 2:10–18). As Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, “Whatever is not assumed cannot be healed.”

Later, Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, so stressed the humanity of Christ that he could not give an account of how he was one integrated person. His enemies claimed he divided Christ into two persons. He taught a conjunction between the Son and the humanity, not a union and incarnation (John 1:14). Again, if there were no such incarnation, our humanity would not have been taken permanently into union by Christ.

In another area, the monk Pelagius held that fallen persons have the ability to respond to the gospel unaided by divine grace. The church renounced this as heresy on the basis that it rejected the gravity of sin

and thus the need for God's grace to enable us to believe. It set the stage for the teaching of salvation by moral effort rather than dependence on the grace of God.

In our own day, the idea of universal salvation has become widespread. Since the church is now deeply divided, it is not capable of making the determinations it did in the early centuries. This does not diminish the reality and the danger of heretical ideas; in fact, it increases it, since authoritative pronouncements for the truth are that much more difficult to make. If everyone is to be saved, or if there is no judgment that leads to eternal consequences for the wicked, then there is no need for the gospel, which in place of the reality of perishing offers eternal life to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

In each of these instances, from the Bible and church history, heresies emerge from within the church. They are not ideas produced from the outside world. Often they arise because a resolution to a particular problem has not yet been reached. When proposals are advanced in such a debate, some are seen to pose grave threats. Heretics do not necessarily have evil intentions—but that does not diminish the danger they pose. Difficulties Arise

Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a particular teaching is heretical or simply erroneous, however serious the error may be. This is the case with many of the dogmas of Rome. Rome's doctrine of justification is effectively the same as Augustine's. It is seriously wrong and justified the Reformation—but are we prepared to anathematize Augustine?

It can also be difficult to judge whether an erroneous teaching has the potential to be heretical. This is especially so when it is first advanced. It is important to grasp the meaning a particular preacher or theologian intends before we move to assess him.

Some branches of the church may, and often do, consider a teaching held by another branch to be heretical, when this may not be the case. The Latin church maintains that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Eastern church believes the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (citing John 15:26). Some more strident voices in the East have argued that the Western position is heresy since, in their eyes, it blurs the eternal distinctions between the Father and the Son and jeopardizes the indivisible unity of the Trinity by positing that the Father is

not the sole source of the personhood of the Spirit. However, for the most part the East has thought the Western position to be a serious error.

Practical Dangers of Heresy

Since heresy is an effective denial of, or fatal wound to, the gospel, it resembles a weed growing in a beautiful garden, something to be rooted out before it absorbs the nutrients in the soil, occupying space and choking the good plants. False beliefs are not neutral; they distort and destroy true godliness.

Practical Benefits of Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy is an outflow of what the church believes and confesses about God, Christ, and salvation. The bishops at the great ecumenical councils were conscious that they were not innovators but were simply confessing the faith the church had always held, coming down to them from the apostles. As such, orthodoxy is rooted in the Bible and in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, given this, it is perhaps misleading to look for practical reasons to support orthodoxy, as if those reasons carry greater weight than the reality from which they are derived. It is sufficient to say that maintaining the gospel is preeminently something that brings glory to God and thus is its own justification.

As an example of how orthodox teaching is rooted in the Bible and is nothing about which to be ashamed, we note the statement of the Council of Constantinople (a.d. 381): “We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Far from being an imposition by those determined to enhance church power, this declaration reflects the teaching of Scripture. In Ephesians 2:11–21, Paul proclaims that the gospel has broken down barriers of culture and race, uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body. The one church is thereby to be found throughout the world, catholic in its scope. It is built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets as a holy temple in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father.

Since Scripture is breathed out by God the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), teaching in accord with Scripture and the gospel is life giving under the impetus of the Spirit. Orthodox theology is an application of the gospel of Christ as it addresses this or that aspect of Biblical teaching. The Holy Spirit leads, guides, and protects the church of Jesus Christ, enabling it to follow the Word of God that he himself breathed out for our life and salvation. Expressions such as “dead orthodoxy” are oxymorons.

Orthodoxy is not dead. Any teaching that can be considered dead can hardly be orthodox. Right doctrine is the specifically focused expression of the gospel, the power of God for salvation.

The Person of Christ

Jesus Is Divine

The church affirms, following Scripture, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who has become man. His deity is stated or entailed pervasively throughout the NT. He is the Word who was in the beginning with God and was God (John 1:1). He could say to his opponents that he preexisted Abraham (John 8:58), is equal to God (John 5:17–29), and is one with him (John 10:30). Paul refers to him as being in the form of God and equal to him (Phil. 2:6–7).

Throughout his ministry he calls God "Father" and says he was sent by him (John 5:19–47; 6:25–40). He presents himself as coordinate with the Father as the object of faith (John 14:1) and in sovereignty and knowledge (Matt. 11:25–27). Paul characteristically calls him Kyrios ("Lord"); this is significant, because when first-century Jews read the Scriptures aloud, they pronounced the covenant name YHWH ("Yahweh") as Adonay ("Lord"), which in Greek translation is Kyrios. He is Jesus Christ our Lord (Phil. 2:9–11; Rom. 1:4; etc.), our God and Savior —salvation in the OT was a work of Yahweh (Titus 2:10–13).

He is Creator and Ruler of the cosmos (John 1:1–5; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3) and Judge of the world (Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:19–29; 2 Cor. 5:10), functions only God can perform. Worship is due only to God; the apostle John is rebuked by an angel for worshiping the angel (Rev. 19:9–10; 22:8–9). However, Christ receives prayer (Acts 7:59–60; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20).

Jesus Is Human

With this as the backdrop, we note John's key declaration: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The same Word who was in the beginning with God and is God took human nature in the incarnation. The phrase "in the beginning" (John 1:1) points back to Genesis 1:1 and the creation of the universe. This was the work of the Word, without whom "was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). This Word became man. Yet in doing so, he did not for one nanosecond cease to be who he always was and is. The subject of the succeeding clauses in John 1:14–18 is still the Word: the Word lived among us; we

saw his glory; he brought grace and truth; and, being God, he revealed God to us.

In taking to himself a human nature, the eternal Son of God underwent a normal process of human gestation and birth. The conception was supernatural; the birth was not—"conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" (Apostles' Creed). He had a normal development and growth from infancy to childhood to adulthood (Luke 2:40–52). He experienced a range of human relationships—with parents, brothers, sisters, and friends (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus). He grew in favor with other people (Luke 2:52). He knew hunger and thirst (John 4:7–8; 19:28), weariness and sorrow (John 4:6; 11:33–38). As a human, he feared death (Matt. 26:36–46 and parallels). He suffered betrayal and disappointment (Matt. 26:14–16, 30–35, 47–56; John 6:60–67). He was tempted in all points as we are but did not sin (Heb. 4:14–16). He suffered (Heb. 2:14–18; 5:7–8). He died and was buried.

Evidently Christ was, and is, the eternal Son of God yet simultaneously fully human. How could this be? Was he some kind of schizoid (suffering from disintegration of personality)? This was not the case. The NT presents him as a fully integrated person. While the gap between Creator and creature is vast, humans were created in the image of God with an inherent compatibility with him. Whereas Adam was made in God's image, Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3), the second or last Adam. This is not the conjunction of two autonomous natures—divine and human. Rather, it is the incarnation, whereby the Son, the second person of the Trinity, takes on human nature—body and soul—and makes it his own without ceasing to be who he is as God.

Christ rose from the dead in the same body he had before. The marks of the nails in his hands and feet were still visible (John 20:26–29). He ate food (Luke 24:41–43), conversed with strangers (Luke 24:13–27), and was confused with other people (John 20:14–15). However, he was transformed by the Holy Spirit so that he was able to pass through locked doors (John 20:19, 26) and disappear from sight (Luke 24:31). When he ascended, he left a state of regular interaction with his apostles and friends and entered the presence of the Father in the clouds—an expression frequently associated in Scripture with the

glory of God. He did so in our human nature, now seated at the right hand of God, ruling the universe (Eph. 1:19–23).

Jesus Is Savior

Do we want to know what God is like, he who “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16)? Look no further; he has made himself known as one of us. Jesus could say to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He says to us all, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), the rest into which God entered after creation, the rest only he can give, the rest Jesus gives.

Jesus Christ is utterly sufficient as our Savior. Man had sinned; man had to make atonement. We could not do it, for we had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Only God can save us, for only he has the power to do so. Christ is the supreme revelation of God, as he is the personal embodiment of God. As the Son of God, the only source of eternal life (John 20:30–31), he is able to save us; as the sinless man, he is qualified to do so (Heb. 4:14–15). As King, he has supreme authority over the entire creation. His promises can and will be effected. Christ will keep us to the end, raise us from the dead, and give us eternal life on the new earth. Praise be to his holy name!

In our own lives, God works miraculously—raising us from spiritual death to life by his direct command: “Let there be light!” (2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 2:1–5; etc.) Yet we mature in Christ daily as we bring forth the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). It is God’s providence that completes this work, guiding us not in extraordinary ways but through his ordinary means of both common and saving grace. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt. 10:29).

God’s Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Scripture has no difficulty attributing the same action or event to both God and creatures. God is different from us—not just quantitatively (e.g., having more power and knowledge) but qualitatively. God freely acts as Creator, and we act freely as creatures. There is no “freedom pie” divided between God and us. It is not only that God has more power than we do but that he has all the power of deity and has given us all the creaturely power he deems appropriate for those created in his image.

Consequently, God’s providence ordinarily works with nature, not against it. Christian theologians call this concursus (“going together”), where God’s activity and human activity are involved in bringing about the same effect but in different ways. When Joseph as prime minister of Egypt confronted his brothers who had sold him into slavery, he could say, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). The apostle Peter makes the same point with regard to Christ’s crucifixion, where the people are blamed for crucifying Christ and yet God had foreordained it for their salvation (Acts 2:23).

Key Distinctions

In considering providence, two distinctions are worth bearing in mind.

First is the distinction between God’s common and saving grace. After the fall, no one deserves God’s gifts of existence and the goods of daily life. Nevertheless, God is good to all his creatures (Ps. 145:9, 15–16). Jesus reiterates this general kindness in his Sermon on

the Mount: God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). Believers and unbelievers alike share in the common curse of a fallen creation and the common grace of a generous King. For believers, every common blessing is a foretaste of heavenly joys, and “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18).

Second is the distinction between God’s hidden decree and his revealed will. We know from Scripture what God was doing in and through Israel. But we have no revelation about God’s purposes for our own countries or even our own lives apart from his moral and saving will in Scripture. We know from Scripture that we are not to marry unbelievers, but God does not tell us whom we will marry. Although God has decreed everything that comes to pass, he has not revealed everything he has decreed (Deut. 29:29; 1 Cor. 2:7–10). It is not only unexpected that we should know God’s secret purposes; such inquisitiveness is treated in Scripture as an affront to God’s majesty (Rom. 11:34). Therefore, we are responsible to understand and apply God’s Word and also to exercise common sense, the wisdom of others, and the ordinary means God has provided for our daily lives.

On the basis of Romans 12:2, some have argued we should strive to discern God’s “perfect” will for our life—that is, his “Plan A.” Sometimes there is great anxiety about stepping out of God’s secret will for our life, falling into “Plan B.” However, this verse promises that “by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” God’s perfect will here is simply what he has revealed in Scripture, not his hidden plan. Although God has “determined allotted periods and the boundaries of [our] dwelling place” (Acts 17:26), we have no way of discovering the details God wishes to remain hidden to us.

We may not know how God will work together our mistakes, sins, and foolishness for our good and his glory. However, we do know that he has triumphed over evil ultimately in Christ (1 Cor. 15:25). The revelation now of this mystery is all we need for our confidence that our lives are not tragic and meaningless, as they might seem to us at times.

Evil and Suffering

If God is good and created a world that reflects his goodness, how can there be evil and suffering? In the history of religious philosophy, there are really only three answers to this question. First is dualism, according to which evil is attributable to an equally sovereign deity—for example, the creator of matter, indistinguishable from Satan, as the Zoroastrians and Gnostics held. Second is monism, where evil is simply darker than light but a necessary counterpart to goodness.

Third is the biblical worldview, which teaches that God is sovereign and that evil is only possible as the twisting, distorting, and depraving of God's good creation. In this third view, for example, God is the author of human liberty to choose, but wrong human choice has warped and corrupted that liberty. Evil, in this view, is not caused directly by God but is also impossible apart from God. It is always parasitic, depending on God's good creation as the masterpiece it disfigures. Satan and sinful human beings have no independent existence or power, so their determination to do evil is a corruption of the power of self-determination that God gives humanity as his creatures. In this view, God is not responsible for evil; neither does evil have an independent existence apart from his sovereignty.

This still does not explain the "problem of evil." In Eastern religions, evil and suffering are simply illusions, and we experience them only when we assume they exist. One can adopt this explanation only at the cost of denying not only God's Word but also the obvious facts of the daily news and our own lives.

There are myriad attempts to solve this vexing conundrum in Western philosophy as well. Christianity does not claim to offer a resolution that would satisfy our intellectual dilemma. Ultimately, evil is a mystery. However, God's Word does provide something more important, namely, the assurance of a historical resolution of the problem of evil through Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that sin is first of all an assault upon God and his good creation, he took the initiative to assume our humanity, fulfill the law, bear our curse, and be raised as the beginning of the renewal of the whole created order. The Son's incarnation and his redeeming work underscore that evil is contrary to God's nature and will,

and that he is nevertheless sovereign over it. Not even the concerted rebellion of Satan, his angelic minions, and the human race can thwart God's purposes to redeem sinners and bring a new creation into being by his grace.

Prayer

Some wonder why we should pray if God is sovereign. If God has already determined the end from the beginning, how do our prayers have any impact? Even if God merely knows infallibly everything that will happen, then what he knows is already eternally certain. This is true, but we must remember that God has determined not only the goal but also the means. Just as God has decreed that a child will be born through a host of decisions and actions of the parents, he has chosen to make our prayers the means through which he will bring these plans to pass. The real question, then, is why we would pray if God were not sovereign (that is, not in ultimate control of our circumstances) but had instead left that ultimate sovereignty to chance, fate, or the whims of others.

It is because the biblical story of God's loving grace in Jesus Christ is true that we can pray to God. If God were not sovereign, there would be no reason to seek his intervention. Yet if God were not good, we would have no reason to imagine he would care. Since the Father to whom we pray "so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" for us and for our salvation (John 3:16), we are confident not only that he can make "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28), but that he is indefatigably committed to doing so.

Reading the Bible Theologically

To read the Bible “theologically” means to read the Bible “with a focus on God”: his being, his character, his words and works, his purpose, presence, power, promises, and precepts. The Bible can be read from different standpoints and with different centers of interest, but this article seeks to explain how to read it theologically.

The Bible: The Church’s Instruction Book

All 66 books of the Bible constitute the book of the Christian church. And the church, both as a whole and in the life of its members, must always be seen to be the people of the book. This glorifies God, its primary author.

God has chosen to restore his sin-spoiled world through a long and varied historical process, central to which is the creating—by redemptive and sanctifying grace—of what is literally a new human race. This unfinished process has so far extended over four millennia. It began with Abraham; it centers on the first coming of the incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ; and it is not due for completion till he comes again. Viewed as a whole, from the vantage point of God’s people within it, the process always was and still is covenantal and educative. Covenantal indicates that God says to his gathered community, “I am your God; you shall be my people,” and with his call for loyalty he promises them greater future good than any they have yet known. Educative indicates that, within the covenant, God works to change each person’s flawed and degenerate nature into a new, holy selfhood that expresses in responsive terms God’s own moral likeness. The model is Jesus Christ, the only perfect being that the world has ever seen. For God’s people to sustain covenantal hopes and personal moral ideals as ages pass and cultures change and decay, they must have constant, accessible, and authoritative instruction from God. And that is what the Bible essentially is.

This is why, as well as equipping everywhere a class of teachers who will give their lives to inculcating Bible truth, the church now seeks to translate the Bible into each person’s primary language and to spread universal literacy, so that all may read and understand it.

The Bible Is Canonical

God’s plan is that through his teaching embodied in the Bible, plus knowledge and experience of how he rewards obedience and punishes disobedience in a disciplinary way, his people should learn love, worship, and service of God himself, and love, care, and service of others, as exemplified by Jesus Christ. To this end each generation needs a written “textbook” that sets forth for all time God’s unchanging standards of truth, right, love and goodness, wisdom and worship, doctrine and devotion. This resource will enable people to see what they should think and do, what ideals they should form, what goals they should set, what limits they should observe, and what life strategies they should follow. These are the functions that are being claimed for the Bible when it is called “canonical.” A “canon” is a rule or a standard. The Bible is to be read as a God-given rule of belief and behavior—that is, of faith and life.

The Bible Is Inspired

Basic to the Bible’s canonical status is its “inspiration.” This word indicates a divinely effected uniqueness comparable to the uniqueness of the person of the incarnate Lord. As Jesus Christ was totally human and totally divine, so is the Bible. All Scripture is witness to God, given by divinely illuminated human writers, and all Scripture is God witnessing to himself in and through their words. The way into the mind of God is through the expressed mind of these human writers, so the reader of the Bible looks for that characteristic first. But the text must be read, or reread, as God’s own self-revelatory instruction, given in the form of this human testimony. In this way God tells the reader the truth about himself; his work past, present, and future; and his will for people’s lives.

The Bible Is Unified

Basic also to the Bible’s canonical status is the demonstrable unity of its contents. Scripture is no ragbag of religious bits and pieces, unrelated to each other; rather, it is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern of judgment and mercy, promise and fulfillment. The Bible consists of two separate collections: the OT, written over a period of about 1,000 years, and the NT, written within a generation several centuries after the OT was completed. Within such a composite array one would expect to find some crossed wires or incoherence, but none are found here. While there are parallel narratives, repetitions, and some borrowings from book to book, the Bible as a whole tells a single, straightforward story. God the Creator is at the center

throughout; his people, his covenant, his kingdom, and its coming king are the themes unfolded by the historical narratives, while the realities of redemption from sin and of godly living (faith, repentance, obedience, prayer, adoration, hope, joy, and love) become steadily clearer. Jesus Christ, as fulfiller of OT prophecies, hopes, promises, and dreams, links the two Testaments together in an unbreakable bond. Aware that at the deepest level the whole Bible is the product of a single mind, the mind of God, believers reading it theologically always look for the inner links that bind the books together. And they are there to be found.

Theological Reading of the Bible: A Quest for God

Reading Scripture theologically starts from the truths reviewed above: (1) that the Bible is a God-given guide to sinners for their salvation, and for the life of grateful godliness to which salvation calls them; (2) that the Bible is equally the church's handbook for worship and service; (3) that it is a divinely inspired unity of narrative and associated admonition, a kind of running commentary on the progress of God's kingdom plan up to the establishing of a world-embracing, witnessing, suffering church in the decades following Christ's ascension and the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit; and (4) that the incarnate Son of God himself, Jesus the Christ, crucified, risen, glorified, ministering, and coming again, is the Bible's central focus, while the activities of God's covenant people both before and after Christ's appearing make up its ongoing story. Theological reading follows these leads and is pursued theocentrically, looking and listening for God throughout, with the controlling purpose of discerning him with maximum clarity, through his own testimony to his will, works, and ways. Such reading is pursued prayerfully, according to Martin Luther's observation that the first thing one needs to become a theologian through Bible reading is prayer for the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit. And prayerful theological Bible reading will be pursued in light of three further guiding principles, as follows.

First, revelation was progressive. Its progress, in its written form, was not (as has sometimes been thought) from fuzzy and sometimes false (OT) to totally true and clear (NT), but from partial to full and complete. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days [the concluding era of this world's life] he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). In the Gospels, the Epistles, and the books of Acts and Revelation, readers are now faced with God's

final word to the world before Christ comes again. Theological Bible reading maintains this perspective, traversing the OT by the light of the NT.

Second, the Bible's God-language is analogical. Today's fashion is to call it "metaphorical," which is not wrong, but "analogical" is the term that makes clearest the key point: the difference involved when everyday words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—are used of God. Language is God's gift for personal communication between humans and between God and humans. But when God speaks of himself—or when people speak to him or about him—the definitions, connotations, implications, valuations, and range of meaning in each case must be adjusted in light of the differences between him and his creation. God is infinite and flawless; people are both finite and flawed. So when everyday words are used of God, all thought of finiteness and imperfection must be removed, and the overall notion of unlimited, self-sustaining existence in perfect loving holiness must be added in. For instance, when God calls himself "Father," or his people in response call him their "Father," the thought will be of authoritative, protecting, guiding, and enriching love, free from any lack of wisdom that appears in earthly fathers. And when one speaks of God's "anger" or "wrath" in retribution for sin that he as the world's royal Judge displays, the thought will be as free from the fitful inconsistency, irrationality, bad temper, and loss of self-control that regularly mars human anger.

These mental adjustments underlie the biblical insistence that all God's doings, even those that involve human distress, are glorious and praiseworthy. This doxological, God-glorifying tone and thrust marks even books such as Job and Lamentations, and the many complaint prayers in the Psalter. The Bible writers practice analogical adjustment so smoothly, unobtrusively, and unselfconsciously that it is easy to overlook what they are doing. But the theological reader of the Bible will not miss this point.

Third, the one God of the Bible is Trinitarian and triune. God is three persons in an eternal fellowship of love and cooperation within the one divine Being. Each person is involved in all that God does. God is a team no less than he is a complex entity. In the NT this concept is apparent, but in the OT, where the constant emphasis is on the truth that Yahweh is the one and only God, the truth of the Trinity hardly breaks the surface.

God’s triunity is, however, an eternal fact, though it has been clearly revealed only through Christ’s coming. Theological Bible readers are right to read this fact back into the OT, following the example of NT writers in their citing of many OT passages.

Theological Reading of the Bible: The Quest for Godliness

Theology is for doxology, that is, glorifying God by praise and thanks, by obedient holiness, and by laboring to extend God’s kingdom, church, and cultural influence. The goal of theological Bible reading is not just to know truth about God (though one’s quest for godliness must start there) but to know God personally in a relationship that honors him—which means serving Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, the world’s real though unrecognized Lord, who came to earth, died, rose, and ascended for his people, and has given them the Holy Spirit. To have him fill believers’ horizons and rule their lives in his Father’s name is the authentic form—the foundation, blueprint, scaffolding, and construction—of Christian godliness, to which theological Bible reading is a God-intended means.

So, three questions must govern readers of the inspired Word:

First, in the passage being read, what is shown about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What does it say about what the holy Three are doing, have done, and will do in God’s world, in his church, and in lives committed to him? What does it reveal about God’s attributes, that is, God’s power and character, how he exists and how he behaves? One reason, no doubt, for God’s panoramic, multigenred layout of the Bible—with history, homily, biography, liturgy, practical philosophy, laws, lists, genealogies, visions, and so on, all rubbing shoulders—is that this variety provides so many angles of illumination on these questions for theological Bible readers’ instruction.

Second, in the passage being read, what is shown about the bewildering, benighted world with all its beautiful and beneficial aspects alongside those that are corrupt and corrupting? Discerning the world’s good and evil for what they are, so as to embrace the world’s good and evade its temptations, is integral to the godliness that theological Bible reading should promote.

Third, in the passage being read, what is shown to guide one’s living, this day and every day? The theological logic of this question, through which the reader must work each time, is this: since God, by his own testimony, said that to those people in their situation, what does it follow that he

says to readers today in their own situation? The Holy Spirit answers prayer by giving discernment to apply Scripture in this way. Those who seek will indeed find.

Revelation

The Nature and Terminology of Revelation

The God who knows and loves himself in the perfect happiness of the Trinity seeks to share his happiness with us by making himself an object of our knowledge and love. Revelation is central to the fulfillment of this divine quest. In revelation, God communicates something about himself, his purpose, his works, and his will to creatures with the aim of bringing those creatures into fellowship with himself. Revelation is a form of God's communicative goodness, holiness, and love seeking the creature's knowledge, love, and praise of him.

The Bible uses a wide variety of terms to describe God's acts of revelation. God "makes known" (Neh. 9:14; Ps. 16:11; 25:4; 77:14; 103:7; John 15:15), "reveals" (Isa. 53:1; Dan. 2:21–22, 28; Matt. 11:25; Rom. 1:17–18; Eph. 3:4–5), "appears" (Gen. 35:9; Deut. 31:15; Titus 2:11, 13; 3:4), "shows" (Gen. 12:1; Matt. 16:21; Luke 24:40; John 5:20; 14:8–9; 20:20; Rev. 1:1), and "speaks" (Ex. 33:11; Lev. 25:1; Num. 1:1; Ps. 62:11–12; Amos 3:8; John 9:29; Heb. 1:1–4). Short of the beatific vision in heaven, divine speech constitutes the supreme form of God's revelation (Num. 12:6–8; Deut. 4:12), the fullest expression of God's being and purpose to pilgrims who have not yet arrived at their final resting place (John 1:1, 18; 1 Cor. 13:12).

The source of revelation is the triune God. Revelation, biblically conceived, is God's self-revelation: God the Father revealing himself through God the Son by God the Holy Spirit. The content of revelation is God and all things in relation to him, with Jesus Christ standing at the center. The goals of revelation are to render God's enemies inexcusable (Rom. 1:18–20), to bring elect sinners into his covenant friendship (Ps. 25:14; John 15:15; 1 John 1:3), and, ultimately, to manifest the riches of his glory (Deut. 5:24; John 1:14; Rom. 9:23; 2 Cor. 1:20; Col. 1:27).

The Sources and Media of Revelation

God reveals himself and his purposes in different ways through different media. General revelation refers to that which God makes known through creation to all rational creatures (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:19–20). In general revelation, our knowledge proceeds from creation to its creator. The artwork leads us to the artist. The knowledge of God available through general revelation is necessarily limited. Although general revelation manifests a number of truths about God's existence, nature, and moral

law, the efficacy of general revelation is severely hampered due to the blinding effects of sin upon the mind and the hardening effects of sin upon the heart (Rom. 1:18, 21–23).

Special revelation refers to that which God makes known through various media (e.g., visions, dreams, and speech) to objects of his saving mercy. In special revelation, the Creator of all things addresses us personally. The artist reveals himself to us. The knowledge of God available through special revelation far exceeds what is available through general revelation in both content and efficacy. Through special revelation, we come to know the mystery of God's triune being and his purpose for the church in Jesus Christ by the illuminating power of the Spirit (Matt. 11:25–27; 1 Corinthians 2; Eph. 3:4–10; Col. 1:27).

God himself speaks in special revelation (Deut. 4:36; Mark 1:11; 9:7; 2 Pet. 1:17). But ordinarily, prophets and apostles are the vehicles of God's speech to humans (Ex. 4:1–16; Deut. 18:18; Gal. 1:16). The ministry of prophets and apostles having ceased (Eph. 2:20), God transmits and communicates his prophetic and apostolic Word to us in Holy Scripture (Deut. 31:9–30; Eph. 3:4–5; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). As a product of divine inspiration, Holy Scripture is perfectly equipped to fulfill a number of revelatory ends. Scripture is able to make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ (John 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:10–11). And it is sufficient for training us in truth and godliness (Ps. 119:160; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; Titus 1:1).

God's glorious self-revelation finds its full expression in the face of Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6). Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God—the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his being (Heb. 1:1–4). Jesus Christ is also the ultimate revelation of God's purpose for creation (Eph. 1:9–10).

God's Covenants and the History of Revelation

Covenant is the primary mode of God's special revelation to his people. In the various covenants God makes, he reveals his name, promises, and will for his people's lives and worship (Gen. 17:1–14; Ex. 3:14; 20:1–17; Luke 22:14–20). Covenant is also the motor whereby God moves history forward toward its divinely appointed end. God makes promises and fulfills them. As he does so, he makes himself known through his promise-keeping works. God's act of making known "his salvation" and revealing "his righteousness in the sight of the nations" (Ps. 98:2) is an

act of remembering his covenant promises to the house of Israel (Ps. 98:3).

Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God, is the supreme fulfillment of all God's covenant promises (2 Cor. 1:20). In the covenant, God causes his name to be remembered, he comes to us, and he blesses us (Ex. 20:24). In Jesus Christ, God's supreme covenant name is revealed: "The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). In Christ, God's supreme covenant presence is realized (John 1:14; Matt. 1:23; 28:20) and his supreme covenant blessing is poured out (Acts 1:4–5; Gal. 3:14). This is the heritage vouchsafed to us through Jesus' blood, the blood of the new covenant (Luke 22:20).

Jesus' climactic place in God's revelatory purpose and the history of the covenant gives biblical revelation its distinctive shape. The good news of Jesus is promised beforehand in the OT and proclaimed in the NT as the fulfillment of that promise (Acts 13:32–33; Rom. 1:1–4). This pattern of promise and fulfillment in Jesus Christ accounts for the underlying unity of biblical revelation. Nevertheless, because there is a "before" and "after" to the Son of God's incarnate appearance (Gal. 3:23–24), biblical revelation is a revelation of things "old" and "new" (Matt. 13:52; 2 Corinthians 3), of things once "hidden" but now "revealed" (Dan. 12:4; Matt. 13:35; Rom. 16:25–26; Col. 1:26; Rev. 22:10). The contrast between the OT and NT, however, is not absolute. The mystery once hidden and now revealed is made known "through the prophetic writings" (Rom. 16:26).

The Beatific Vision

Through divine revelation, God makes known to us the "path of life." Through divine revelation, God instructs us that he is the end of that path, in whose "presence"—literally, in whose "face"—is "fullness of joy" and at whose right hand are "pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11).

The revelation of God's glory in Christ creates a hunger to see more of God's glory in Christ (Ps. 27:4; 63:1–2). The gospel promises us that this hunger will one day be fully satisfied. The gospel promises us we will see God's face; our souls will find rest in this sight (Matt. 5:8; 1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 22:4). The substance of that promise is our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

The God who knows and loves himself in the perfect happiness of the Trinity seeks to share his happiness with us by making himself an object

of our knowledge and love. In the new creation, God's quest will reach its goal: the triune God will shine the light of his countenance upon his children, and they will rejoice and be glad in him. Until the day God's glory is fully and finally revealed and our happiness is fully and finally realized, we pay attention to the light of God's revelation in Holy Scripture (2 Pet. 1:19) and purify ourselves after the pattern of the One who is the source of Holy Scripture's radiance, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 John 3:2–3; Heb. 12:14).

Salvation

Defining Salvation

Salvation may well be the most commonplace yet deeply cherished word in the Christian's vocabulary. Lamentably, though, this beautiful biblical term has suffered distortion by those who have sought to redefine not only the nature of salvation but also the Christian faith in general. Thus, for many, "salvation" is now little more than self-realization or attaining some vague sense of personal authenticity. What we are "saved" from is low self-esteem, meaninglessness, aimlessness, or anomie (uprootedness caused by a breakdown in social values). Others would point to the need for greater education to save us from ignorance. Some conceive of salvation as cultural refinement. One man said of the impact of his wife in rescuing him from loneliness and despair: "She was my salvation."

The meaning we give to the notion of salvation clearly depends on what we perceive to be our greatest threat personally and corporately. In other words, the idea and experience of salvation will never have the right effect on our lives until we grasp what we are saved from and to.

The Scriptures consistently speak of our desperate plight apart from Christ. We are alienated from God (2 Cor. 5:18–21), subject to his righteous wrath (John 3:36; Eph. 2:1–3), and hostile to him (Rom. 3:9–18). We are, in fact, his enemies (Rom. 5:10) and under the curse imposed by divine law (Gal. 3:13–14). As urgent and pressing as the many psychological, financial, and personal predicaments we face are, the most immediate and eternal danger to the welfare of individual persons is the judgment of God we all rightly deserve because of sin and idolatry. Salvation, therefore, is primarily deliverance or rescue from the penal consequences incurred by our rebellion against the Creator. In sum, it is "from the wrath to come" that Jesus has saved us and set us free (1 Thess. 1:10).

But there is much more to the way the language of save and salvation is used in Scripture that warrants our close attention. In the NT, the verb to save and its cognates are used with three primary senses.

Salvation Is Spiritual Rescue

First, forms of to save most often refer to our spiritual rescue from well-deserved damnation. Jesus used the language of salvation in this way (Luke 7:49–50; 8:12), as did Paul. Perhaps the most well-known text using the terminology in a redemptive or soteriological sense is the apostle's declaration in Ephesians that "by grace" we "have been saved through faith" and not because of "works" (Eph. 2:8–9; cf. Rom. 5:9–10; 1 Cor. 1:18, 21; Titus 3:4–5). Paul also makes it clear that although we are saved apart from works, we are not saved without them. That is to say, whereas human moral effort is by no means the foundation or meritorious cause of salvation, grace-empowered works are the fruit and consequence of it. "We are his workmanship," says Paul, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Indeed, the "grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people" (Titus 2:11). But this "salvation" is not without any regard to works, for it is designed to train us to "renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

A more expansive examination of this doctrine of salvation reveals that several interrelated truths are entailed, each of which serves in its own way to magnify the mercy shown to sinful men and women.

Regeneration, more popularly known as the new birth or being born again, is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in which new life is imparted to those who were "dead" in their "trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1, 5; cf. John 3:1–8). This inner renewal is wrought through the preaching of the gospel (James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23–25) and issues in repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ.

The NT refers to this work of the Spirit in terms of the divine call of God by which the elect are effectually drawn to Christ (John 6:44; Acts 2:39; Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9). Whereas all humankind is externally invited to embrace the saving benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (Matt. 11:28–30; 22:14), only the elect of God are the undeserved recipients of the internal call by which they are brought to spiritual life and enabled to see the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Awakened to the reality of their sin, the elect

repent of it and embrace by faith the offer of full and final forgiveness of sins secured for them through the atoning death of Christ on the cross (Eph. 1:7). At the moment of their conversion, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them and declares them forgiven and forever justified in his sight (Rom. 3:21–25; 2 Cor. 5:21). Salvation, therefore, becomes an experiential reality for the elect through faith in the alien righteousness of Christ, a faith God graciously supplies (Eph. 2:8–9).

Those whom God thus effectually calls to faith in Christ are blessed with adoption as the spiritual sons and daughters of their heavenly Father (John 1:11–13; 1 John 3:1–3). In redeeming for himself a people, God sanctifies them both definitively, in setting them apart and consecrating them unto himself as his unique possession and eternal inheritance (1 Cor. 6:11), and experientially, by inaugurating through the Spirit a process by which they are progressively conformed to the image of Jesus himself (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 2:12–13; Heb. 10:14). Assurance is repeatedly given in Scripture that those whom God in this way chose, called, regenerated, justified, and is sanctifying will in fact be preserved indefectibly for the consummation of salvation in the glorification of their bodies (Phil. 1:6; 3:20–21; 1 Pet. 1:5).

Such is the breathtaking complexity of God's saving work in and through Jesus Christ. But the NT language of salvation does not end with our reconciliation to God. There are two additional senses in which one may be saved.

Salvation Is Rescue from Peril

A person may also be saved from perilous circumstances, be it political oppression and tyranny, famine, plague, or the many and varied threats posed by natural catastrophes. The disciples cried out to Jesus in the midst of a life-threatening storm on the Sea of Galilee: "Save us, Lord; we are perishing" (Matt. 8:25). In Philippians 1:19, Paul took comfort that the Philippians were praying for him while he sat in prison: "I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance" (that is to say, his release from incarceration and the ever-present threat of execution). The word translated "deliverance" is the Greek noun sōtēria, salvation.

Salvation Is Healing

Finally, a third way the words to save and salvation are used is with reference to healing of the body. This concept of salvation is found frequently in the gospel narratives in conjunction with the ministry of Jesus to the diseased and demonized. The woman with the discharge of blood was “made well” (lit., “saved”; Matt. 9:21–22) when she reached out in faith and touched the hem of Christ’s garment (cf. Luke 17:19).

Salvation Is Holistic

These many ways in which the salvation word group is used point to the fact that the salvation secured for us in Christ is holistic. God in his grace holds forth for all believers the prospect of complete restoration in body, soul, and spirit, that the whole person might live joyfully in his presence forever.

A mistake frequently made by Christians is to think of salvation as deliverance or rescue from the physical body and from the earth. Christ’s coming, so they think, was designed to facilitate the release of the soul from the body so that believers might live eternally in an ethereal, immaterial, and altogether spiritual heaven. This concept is due far more to the influence of Greek philosophy and Gnosticism than to Scripture. The Bible never speaks of the body as inherently evil or as a prison from which one should seek escape but instead promises that our physical frame will be transformed to be like the “glorious body” of the risen Christ (Phil. 3:21). Likewise, this earth will be set free from the curse consequent to the sin of Adam and will, in a very real sense, be “saved” as a holy habitation for God’s people into eternity (Rom. 8:18–25; 2 Pet. 3:10–13; Rev. 21:1–4).

The Blessings of Salvation

Finally, we should not overlook the many and varied blessings that come with salvation. That is to say, Christ delivers us from both spiritual and physical destruction and brings us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). We are his beloved children (Rom. 8:15–17) in whom the Spirit abides as an indwelling and empowering presence (Eph. 2:22). We have been saved unto an abundant life (John 10:10) and the knowledge of God (John 17:3). Thus salvation is not only from divine wrath but also into the experience of love for Christ and a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).

It is, then, “to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ” that we should ascribe “glory, majesty, dominion, and authority” because he is “able to keep” us “from stumbling and to present” us “blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy” (Jude 24–25).

Scripture

“How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103)

Delight. Life. Truth. Love. Hope. Wonderful. All of these words and many others like them are used in Psalm 119 to describe how the believer relates to God’s Holy Word. Yahweh’s people are encouraged in this extended psalm to meditate upon the divine testimonies, commandments, and promises of the Holy Scriptures, storing them up in their hearts, fixing their eyes upon them, and walking according to the illumination they provide. Just as food and water sustain the body, so a steady diet of the Scriptures nourishes God’s people, bringing comfort, guidance, and strength. As the psalmist concludes, “My heart stands in awe of your words. I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil” (Ps. 119:161b–162). Why? Because through his Word God draws near; here one is invited to know the eternal, holy, majestic, loving, and merciful Lord. When we begin to talk about the doctrine of Scripture, we should always carry with us the attitude modeled for us by the psalmist.

Scripture Reveals God

One of the core concepts in Christianity is that God establishes his people in fellowship with himself. This means he makes himself known to us, not just in terms of fact (Matt. 22:29) but also relationally (Rom. 8:14–15). In our history as his people, he chose some servants (the prophets and apostles) to convey his will to the rest of us. They recorded these revelations in the books we now know as the Scriptures of the OT and NT, principally given to us that we might know what to believe about this God and how we are to live in his world.

Remarkably, although the Bible is made up of 66 distinct “books” written by prophets and apostles in various literary genres over a vast historical period, it nevertheless possesses a divinely arranged unity of meaning. Here God reveals his ways to us. God reveals himself, not by dropping a note from heaven, but through real people in real times—thus we can never forget what is sometimes called the full humanity of Scripture. Even amid the particularities of authors, original audiences, and history, the one true and holy God—Creator and Redeemer of heaven and earth—calls us to himself through these writings.

Consequently, while not every reader will be able to comprehend everything that is contained in the Scriptures, the fundamental message

of salvation in Christ by the Spirit is clear or perspicuous for all who are willing to receive it. Speaking of the sufficiency of Scripture, the 1561 Belgic Confession affirms, “We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it” (Art. 7).

Scripture Depends on the Trinity

Fundamental to the underlying unity of the Scriptures are the work of the Holy Spirit who inspired them (2 Pet. 1:20–21; 2 Tim. 3:16) and the promise that all of the Scriptures ultimately point to God’s great self-revelation in his Son (Heb. 1:1–2; 3:3; Matt. 28:18). The Son and the Spirit give the Bible its unity, purpose, and power. Repeatedly, for example, the NT comments on how the coming of the incarnate Word fulfills the Scriptures (e.g., Matt. 26:54–56; Mark 14:49; Luke 4:21; John 17:12; 19:36; Acts 1:16; Rom. 1:1–4; 1 Cor. 15:3). Jesus says plainly, “Scripture must be fulfilled in me” (Luke 22:37). Although he refers here to one particular OT passage (Isa. 53:12), this connection represents the larger purpose of the Bible, which is to know God in his Son and by his Spirit. This is why the resurrected Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, spoke to two disciples about “Moses and all the Prophets” and then “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). The result? Their hearts burned within them as Jesus “opened to [them] the Scriptures” (Luke 24:32). Later, Jesus appeared to his disciples and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

Here we rightly distinguish between inspiration and illumination. Inspiration points to the Holy Spirit’s work in the prophets and apostles (i.e., the original authors of Scripture) so that they would faithfully record God’s revelation to them, even in and through their own peculiar personalities, writing styles, and historical moments. Illumination is the Holy Spirit’s work enabling us to receive God’s Word. Whether the Word comes through preaching, reading, or memorizing the Bible, it is God’s Spirit who alone can open our eyes, soften our hearts, and make us receptive to God’s Word. The same Spirit who inspired the writings of these Scriptures is the one who applies them to our hearts, that by his illumination we might see the perfect image of God in his Son, Jesus the Messiah (1 Pet. 1:10–12).

Scripture Authoritatively Points to Christ

Early in his ministry, Jesus made it clear that the purpose of the

Scriptures was never merely to impart data, but to be an instrument of relationship with God himself. That is why Jesus warns his religious opponents to stop using the sacred texts against him. Jesus chastens them: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). The words of the Scriptures were always meant to draw us to the Word—the Son of God—because Jesus himself is primarily and originally “the Word of God” (John 1; Rev. 19:13). We love and savor the Scriptures, not because they function as a textbook where we can simply learn stuff, but because in the Scriptures we truly and uniquely meet God himself. In this way the Bible is different from any other book. Scripture’s authority rests upon God himself. As a seventeenth-century confession states: “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.4). We must never forget that the authority, infallibility, and power of Scripture always ultimately rest on the triune God himself. The Father reveals himself through his Son by his Spirit, and we most clearly receive this revelation through the sacred Scriptures.

Scripture Should Be Proclaimed

The Bible says that the Scriptures are to be received, given, spoken, heard, and passed on. Having received the divine Scriptures, we now employ them to point others to the God who has come in his Son and by his Spirit. Accordingly, Philip and Apollos base their proclamation of the good news upon the sacred texts (Acts 8:35; 18:24–28), even as Paul reasons from the Scriptures for his synagogue listeners (Acts 17:1–2). Similarly, those who received the proclamation were themselves commended for “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Since the triune God truly reveals himself in his Word, we should test all claims about God and Christian living according to these Scriptures.

Scripture Should Be Trusted

Orthodox Christians through the ages have had a very high view of the Bible. Coming from the heart of God through his prophets and apostles, the Scriptures are uniquely “breathed out” by the Lord himself, so that these texts are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for

training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture is totally true (Prov. 30:5) and thus authoritative, trustworthy, and life giving. However, we must here distinguish, for example, between the inerrancy of Scripture and the inerrancy of interpretation. The Bible is without error (inerrant) in all it intends to teach, but that does not mean our interpretations of the Bible are always free from error—we can misinterpret or misapply the holy text.

Affirming the Scriptures as the “norming norm,” we always stand under God’s Word, subjecting our interpretations and our lives to the Bible. Since Scripture gains its authority from God—rather than an outside source, such as a private interpreter or ecclesial body—debates about interpretation can be solved only by constantly going back to the Scriptures themselves, submitting ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating our hearts. Protestants, while believing the church is vitally important, nevertheless usually affirm that the ecclesiastical authorities do not give the Bible its authority; instead, the church—guided by the Spirit—simply recognizes the Scripture’s own self-authenticating character (autopistos) and authority. The Reformation slogan that the “church is always being reformed” (ecclesia semper reformanda est) refers to its insistence that the church stands under the Scriptures and always repeated.

Scripture Should Be Obeyed

Handling the Scriptures requires care and calls us to faithful action. As Jesus memorably declared, “Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28). The “royal law” of Scripture (James 2:8) is to love our neighbor truly, humbly, and graciously. Such love originates from God himself, is received by his Spirit through the Word, and then moves through us to others. Augustine argued that the fulfillment and end of the Holy Scriptures is love (On Christian Doctrine 1.39–40), understood first in terms of discovering God’s love for us, then finding how we can rightly love our neighbor. This “principle of charity,” as it is sometimes described, reminds us that the Bible is meant not merely to pass along information, but to reorder our loves and reshape our lives. The Scriptures ably draw us ever more closely to God and his people, even as they also send us out to a world desperately needing this Word of life.ly needs to submit itself to God’s Word.

Sin

Naturally, we do not like hearing bad news. This means we do not like thinking about sin. Yet, strangely, the biblical view of sin is in fact a dark but essential pathway to great rejoicing in Christ. Let us see how.

Adam's Sin

To understand sin properly, we need to start before we each individually sinned or were even born. In the beginning, God created a cosmos entirely and absolutely good (Gen. 1:31). Sin and evil were not among his creatures. Sin, in other words, is a perversion that entered the world when, at the very beginning of human history, the first man sinned. Commanded by God not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve did so anyway. And in that catastrophic moment we were all affected: that is why we sin, and that is why we die. The apostle Paul explains: "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin. . . . Many died through one man's trespass. . . . One trespass led to condemnation for all men. . . . By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Rom. 5:12–19).

First of all, this means we descendants of Adam are born sinners. After he sinned, Adam "fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image" (Gen. 5:3). Like father, like son; we are chips off the old block, sharing Adam's sinful identity. Instead of being sinners because we each sin, we were born sinners—and that is why we sin. Our acts of sin simply manifest who we are and what we are already like.

Second, we not only became sinners ourselves but also "died through one man's trespass" (Rom. 5:15). As Paul sees it, we have not simply inherited Adam's sinful tendency and character; we have inherited his guilty, death-and-hell-bound status (cf. Eph. 2:3). People often balk at this, believing it unfair. But this is simply what it is to be human: we share the fate of the head of the race to which we belong. And that turns into gloriously good news when we think of Christ, who bore our sin as the head of the new humanity: all who are born again in him freely share a righteousness they do not deserve but which is his.

Our problem is not that we tend to slip up and need a bit of forgiveness when we do. If that were the case, it would be easy to think

the solution to our sin is to try harder. No. Since we are born of Adam, sharing his character and status, our very identity is the problem. Trying harder will do us no good whatsoever. We have one hope, which is infinitely sweeter: we must be born again. We need to be taken out of sinful, guilty Adam and united to the head of the new humanity, Jesus Christ.

Our Sin

But what precisely is sin? New Testament terms for sin depict it as missing the mark or "fall[ing] short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); transgression or deviation (Heb. 2:2); disobedience (2 Cor. 10:6); lawlessness (1 John 3:4); unrighteousness (1 John 1:9) and wickedness (James 1:21).

To understand just what those words mean and how they fit together, it helps to ask this question: What exactly did Adam and Eve do wrong in Genesis 3? At one level, it is simple: they disobeyed, doing what the Lord God had forbidden. But look closer and it is clear the problem goes deeper than their external action: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen. 3:6). She ate because she had come to desire the fruit more than she desired God. And this is the essence of sin: desiring and loving something—anything—rather than God. The law's greatest commandment, what we were created to do, is to love the Lord our God with all our heart (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37–38). Sin is that love perverted and misdirected so that we love other things more than God—indeed, that we hate God. Far worse and more profound than acting wrongly, we love wrongly.

The problem of sin therefore goes as deep as it could, down into our hearts, controlling what we long for and love. With a bit of effort we can try to disguise the problem, but nothing in us can be clear of it, for it affects our very alignment, our orientation and motivation. Instead of loving God and finding our satisfaction in him, we instinctively love darkness (John 3:19) and vainly seek satisfaction elsewhere. James put it like this: "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin

when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1:14–15).

While we freely choose to do all the things we want, and are capable of living respectable lives of outward morality, left to ourselves we will never instinctively choose God, because we do not naturally love or desire him. This is why Pelagian and semi-Pelagian dreams of salvation by self-effort and self-will are doomed to failure: they fail to realize our very wills are perverted, that all our self-effort is fuelled by self-love, not love for God. In other words, sin has enslaved us as deeply and pervasively as it is possible to be enslaved. Improving our behavior and acting in ways that seem more religious or moral will not help us; sinners need radical rescue and fundamental reorientation. Born sharing Adam and Eve's desire for things other than God, we each need to be given a new heart that will freely love and be pleased with God (Ezek. 36:26–27; Mark 7:14–23; John 3:3).

Yet even then, when a person has been regenerated, receiving a new heart that has begun to love God, sin remains. When people become Christians, they are freed from the slavery and domination of sin (Rom. 6:14), but the influence, presence, and effects of sin still remain. The Christian must battle with temptation and internal wickedness until death or Christ's return (1 John 1:8–10). Only then will we finally and completely be freed from all sin and its corrupting effects on body and soul. Christ, having borne the punishment for our sin, now helps his people battle the power of sin; then, when he returns, he will entirely remove from his people and his creation the very presence of sin.

The Dark Lane to Life

The biblical view of sin could scarcely be more repellent to twenty-first-century culture. We want to believe we are basically good, that we can fix ourselves. We do not want to hear that we, in ourselves, are fundamentally misguided, totally corrupt, utterly helpless.

Yet it is only when we come to realize we cannot fix ourselves that we will be prepared to look outside ourselves for help and to depend on Christ. Only when we know how great our problem is will we see how great the Savior is (Luke 7:40–43). Only when we see that people are helplessly addicted and enslaved to sin will we give them the one thing with the power to turn and liberate their hearts: the gospel (Rom. 1:16).

The biblical view of sin is, therefore, the bringer of liberty, joy, and compassion when coupled with the announcement of its antidote—the gospel.

What Is Doctrine and Why Is It Important?

What Is Doctrine?

No one can say “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9) without speaking in a deeply doctrinal way, because this simple statement rests on profound biblical truths. It assumes that Christ is the eternal second member of the Trinity, who became uniquely God incarnate, was set forth as our substitutionary atonement, was raised from the dead having conquered all evil, and is now reigning sovereignly over all reality (Eph. 1:20–22). This simple statement also makes connections with other doctrines, such as human nature being created and fallen, the work of the Holy Spirit, and God’s redemptive purposes in history, culminating at the return of Christ. All of this is assumed by this declaration, even if not overtly expressed. Take away these doctrinal truths and the statement “Jesus is Lord” becomes empty.

So what is doctrine? It is the way the central themes of God’s revelation in Scripture are summarized and taught. This teaching builds on their development through the OT. It sees them as having culminated in Christ’s incarnation, words, and work. His teaching (Matt. 7:28; Mark. 1:22; John 7:16) was then expanded and applied by the apostles. Paul placed his own teaching side-by-side with the “preaching of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 16:25; cf. 1 Thess. 4:2). All of this was committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These inspired writings are now preserved within the biblical canon. This revealed Word defines for us how we should think about God, ourselves, our world, the church, and the future.

This was where the earliest Christians began their walk before God: “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [or doctrine]” (Acts 2:42). It is quite clear that learning this doctrine was a Christian necessity and became part of their regular practice. This doctrine is subsequently called “the faith” (Gal. 1:23; Col. 2:7; 1 Tim. 3:9; 4:1; Titus 1:13; Jude 3). What is meant by this is neither vague nor uncertain. It is the confession of truth formulated into specific doctrines. It defines all who are genuinely Christian. It is sometimes called “the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4; 3:15; 4:3; Titus 1:1). Paul calls it a “deposit” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14), a legal term for valuables given into one’s safekeeping. This valuable doctrine he also calls “the pattern of . . . sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13). This is “the good doctrine” (1 Tim. 4:6) that Timothy followed. To the Thessalonians, Paul

says, “Stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us” (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 3:6–12). He means by this, of course, the teaching they had received from God (1 Thess. 2:13)—“the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13) they were to hand on undiluted and uncorrupted. Nothing less will suffice if the church is to be authentic in its life and witness. Paul praises the Romans for their obedience to the “standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Rom. 6:17).

Christian doctrine is present in different ways in the NT. Most often, of course, we meet it in the doctrinal sections in the epistles (e.g., Romans 1–8; Ephesians 1–3). But it is there in other ways too, pointing to the fact that doctrine had become part of the daily life of the early churches. Some early hymns are now embedded in the NT text (e.g., Phil. 2:5–11; probably 1 Tim. 3:16), and in them we see strong doctrinal elements. At other times, the apostolic teaching is crystallized into small creedal statements (e.g., Paul’s set of “trustworthy” sayings in 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:8–9; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Titus 3:4–8). Other passages seem to have a creedal form (e.g., Rom. 1:3–4; 10:8–9; Col. 1:13–20).

This doctrine underlies and, indeed, explains the practice of Christian faith. There is, in fact, no Christian ethic without a foundation of Christian doctrine. The daily practice of this faith is the daily living out of its doctrine. Apostolic Christianity was nothing if it was not about knowing, believing, living, and preaching apostolic doctrine. There was no such thing, then, as undoctrinal Christianity, nor practice undoctrinally founded. This teaching, this doctrine, is an enduring body of truth to which the church is always bound. It is “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Faith in its truth content cannot be individualized. Christian belief cannot mean one thing to one person and something different to another. It is not different from one age to the next, nor is it different from one culture to another. Genuine Christian faith is genuine only when structured around the same enduring biblical doctrines. Christian faith is always the same because the God at its center is always the same, and because the redemptive acts on which it is based, centrally the cross and resurrection, can never be changed. There is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

Whether in brief, compacted phrases or in the more expansive doctrinal sections of the epistles, it is clear that apostolic Christianity was doctrinal in both shape and substance. It was about the doctrines of God, creation,

human nature, Christ, redemption, the church, and the consummation of Christ's kingdom. Apart from these doctrines, there is no Christian faith.

Why Is Doctrine Important?

Although apostolic doctrine was central to the life of the earliest churches, this centrality has not always been easy to preserve. Indeed, many of the great reforming moments that came later were really moments of recovery. Lost ways of doctrinal thinking and lost biblical doctrines were retrieved and made central once again. The reason for the church's rather checkered history in this regard is quite simple: the content of this doctrine, as well as its function in the life of the church, is at the heart of the church's spiritual warfare.

In the churches of John's day, both "the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6) were present. They are today, too. The Spirit of truth was heard in the apostolic teaching. Now it is heard through Scripture and through those who teach and expound that Scripture accurately. The spirit of error lives on in false teachers. The Spirit of truth and the spirit of error each have their respective audiences.

The false teachers troubling the Colossians, Paul says, were "promoting self-made religion" (Col. 2:23), conveyed in purely "human precepts and teachings" (Col. 2:22). It was false doctrine, an alternative to what is true. Nevertheless, it seemed wise. Others in that kind of audience are attracted to what is erroneous because of their "itching ears" (2 Tim. 4:3). They have a taste, even a need, for what is new and exciting (cf. Acts 17:21). And they cannot stand biblical truth. They will not tolerate "sound teaching" (2 Tim. 4:3; cf. 1 Tim. 1:6). Their criterion for accepting any teaching is not how well it accords with what the apostles taught or what we now have in Scripture, but how pleasing it is to them personally.

Perhaps there are some in this kind of audience who do not see the falsehood in false teaching because they are immature. They lack discernment. They are unstable in their understanding. Paul cautions us that we must "no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14; cf. Heb. 5:11–14).

Behind it all, though, are the dark designs of Satan. In life, his temptations are of many kinds and reach us in many different ways. With respect to what we should believe, some of these temptations come to us directly. There may be times, for example, when we doubt the truth of Scripture. Other temptations, though, come through false teachers. Paul

says that in “later times” some people will slip away from their doctrinal foundations. Yet he immediately speaks of this not as some future yet to come but as a present reality already being experienced. Those giving up on apostolic teaching were, instead, “devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1; cf. 2 Tim. 3:1–17). Likewise, he worried that the Thessalonians, whom he had been unable to visit again, had given up on their faith—that is, the doctrine and practice they had been taught— because “somehow the tempter had tempted you” (1 Thess. 3:5; cf. 2:18). The reason Satan so tempts Christians is that biblical doctrine and its functioning are on the front line of his conflict with God.

Satan’s strategy, then, is to oppose, subvert, and mute the content of biblical doctrine and dislodge it from its place in the church’s life. God, though, has placed in the Christian’s hand a weapon for defense. It is the very truth under attack. It is what Paul calls the “belt of truth” and “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:14, 17)—the Bible. These are parts of the Christian’s armor.

This explains a series of admonitions given in the NT that aim to protect the Bible’s doctrinal truth and secure its function in Christian life. Timothy must keep a close watch on himself and what he believes. He must persist in the truth of the apostolic doctrine. He is to “follow” this doctrine, that is, hold on to it, and “guard” it (2 Tim. 1:13–14). This is the “good [or beautiful] deposit” (2 Tim. 1:14). It is to be guarded as one would a precious jewel. It was “entrusted” to Timothy as it has been to us (1 Tim. 6:20). We are to “stand firm and hold to the traditions” (2 Thess. 2:15). Perhaps the image in Paul’s mind is that of a ship rolling and tossing in a storm and of sailors holding on to the sides or rigging to avoid being washed overboard. We must pay close attention to what has been taught, lest we drift away (Heb. 2:1). This original, apostolic teaching, and our confidence in it, must be held “firm to the end” (Heb. 3:14; cf. 1 John 2:24).

Christians, in other words, stay within the Bible’s doctrinal parameters. They are to persist in this doctrine, follow it, guard it, stand firm in it, and hand it on intact. They do not venture outside of it, for that is where faith becomes shipwrecked (1 Tim. 1:19–20). They resist its alternatives. They know this truth is entirely sufficient for life despite uncertainties and suffering. Later, of course, this truth was formulated into the Protestant

principle of sola Scriptura.

It is the Bible's truth that sustains, strengthens, and guides us. This is why Paul speaks of it as he does. It is, he says, made up of "sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13). It is "sound teaching" (2 Tim. 4:3) and "sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1; 1:9). It is in accord with the "sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 6:3). This word, translated here as sound, is used also of physical health. Writing to Gaius, John prays that Gaius will be in "good health" (3 John 2). We encounter the same language in the Gospels. The man with a withered hand was healed so that the useless hand became "healthy like the other" (Matt. 12:13). People marveled when they saw Christ's miracles, for they saw "the crippled healthy" (Matt. 15:31).

These references to "sound" teaching and doctrine, then, are a reminder to us that from such teaching the church's strength arises. From it comes its health. It is what reverses spiritual ills and, sometimes, even deep paralysis. It is what makes churches whole. It is what lays the foundation for their vitality as well as their longevity. This is why biblical doctrine is important. This is why it is essential.

A sound theological method also follows a process that includes biblical exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, practical theology, and other disciplines. Though there is a basic order to these, each part is inevitably interwoven with the others and should not be conducted in isolation from them.

In addition, good theological method recognizes that all people interpret the Bible with already existing beliefs, including theological ones. This has led some skeptics to consider all interpretation to be hopelessly circular. A better response is to trust the Scriptures as authoritative, admit assumptions, consistently study God's Word, and follow sound theological method. As interpreters study the Bible, the Spirit shapes their understanding; over time, this can lead to improved interpretations and a maturing theology.

Biblical Exegesis

The foundation of all good theology is understanding the meaning of biblical passages, beginning with the biblical author's intentions behind the text. Many helpful tools guide readers in understanding the meaning of such passages, including good study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries. When studying a passage, the interpreter needs to note

the particular literary genre (narrative, proverb, parable, gospel, epistle, etc.) and consider literary strategies unique to it. Literary context is also critical, as the placement of any given passage assists the interpreter in understanding what a biblical author meant. The meaning of a word emerges through studying it in the surrounding phrases, clauses, and sentences; the meaning of a sentence appears in its paragraphs or scenes; and the meaning of a scene surfaces in the episodes, sections, or overall book. The historical setting is also formative, as knowing information about the occasion, recipients, author, and church context fosters good interpretation (see the introductions to biblical books in this study Bible for helpful examples).

Two mistakes related to theological exegesis occur at this stage. First, sometimes readers are so focused on finding a particular theme or doctrine in the Bible that they read something into a passage that is not there. We guard against this by first reading passages for what they intend to communicate, and only then considering how the doctrine in question relates to such passages. Second, readers may mistakenly give attention only to passages in which the author explicitly instructs concerning a theological issue. But it should be remembered that the biblical authors write from theological convictions and with theological intentions. And while particular doctrines are not always the primary goal of a given passage, the writers teach theology in order for God's people to follow him appropriately, even if the emphasis is ethical and theology is merely the substructure of the ethics. So, first and foremost, good theology is grounded in biblical exegesis.

Biblical Theology

Ultimately, the context of every biblical passage is not only the particular book but also the entire canon, which places the biblical texts in God's unfolding plan from creation and the fall to redemption and new creation. This narrative frames, orders, and connects the doctrines. Furthermore, it culminates in the person and work of Christ, which therefore gives christological focus to what comes before and after the Gospels (Heb. 1:1–4). It is wise, therefore, both to locate passages within the biblical storyline and to relate them to other passages on the subject. One must attend to how the Bible's story develops through the biblical covenants in the OT, as well as in the dawning of the new covenant in the NT. Attention should also be given not only to the specific doctrines

interpreters are studying, but also to the central themes of each book of the Bible and throughout (covenant, kingdom, atonement, glory, love, holiness, etc.). This will enable readers to see the connections of the doctrine being studied to these other major themes, allowing them to understand and synthesize the doctrine in its relationships, in proportion, and in christological light. Thus, good theology is grounded on biblical exegesis and rooted in biblical theology.

The Church and Historical Theology

Most people today tend to read the Bible individualistically, reading it privately to learn about God and how personally to follow him better. While this is helpful, consider how central the church and church history are to the interpretative process. The church has been the historical interpreter of Scripture. While historical church teachings and creeds are not authoritative over believers in the same way Scripture is (sola Scriptura), modern and postmodern approaches to interpretation have highlighted the individual interpreter (modern) or contemporary communities of readers (postmodern) at the expense of historic church teachings. Contemporary Christians are not the first ones to read the Bible but stand in the historical stream of God's people throughout the centuries and can learn much from church history's leading thinkers (e.g., Athanasius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley), diverging from this stream of thought only with hesitancy and when convinced by sacred Scripture and evident reason. Interpreters should also read the Scripture in the context of their present church community, realizing that it guides their life together with other believers. Thus good theology is done by, with, and for the church, with respect for historic church teaching and in life together.

Other Disciplines

As previously noted, God's general revelation truthfully witnesses to God, creation, and humanity. Although perception of general revelation is distorted by sin, humans are expected to learn from it (Ps. 19:1–6; Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:18–32). As a result, a wide array of disciplines (e.g., the arts, sciences, education) may be useful to theology. For example, philosophy assists theology by examining clarifying questions, terms, categories, concepts, interrelationships, cultural issues, and arguments. To be sure, these disciplines are not themselves identical to general

revelation but are warranted studies of it. These disciplines are also not to be considered entirely reliable, as they are too often rooted in non-Christian assumptions. But insofar as they are reasoned assessments consistent with Scripture, they can be helpful. In sum, good theology trusts the unity of God's revelation, is grounded on special revelation, and values insights from other disciplines.

Systematic Theology

Based on exegesis, biblical theology, the church, and general revelation, a theological synthesis can be offered. It should incorporate the primary biblical themes, address the central theological topics, and show the priorities and interrelationships between the doctrines. Such theology is best organized and communicated in light of the biblical storyline (creation, fall, redemption, new creation; or, God, revelation, creation, humanity, fall, Israel, person of Christ, saving work of Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, and the future). Theology should also be expressed in a way that is contextual, clear, and edifying.

Application and Practical Theology

Theology is incomplete until it is lived out in the church. God uses Scripture to effect change not only in people's beliefs but also in the entirety of their lives. Accordingly, good theological teaching applies biblical truth to the contemporary church in light of its original purpose. So the church's approaches to preaching, teaching, missions, church planting, discipleship, etc., all flow from such application. Sound application also requires appropriate ways of being, loving, thinking, believing, and following, for every Christian and for the church. The biblical story is every Christian's story. God's people are derived from it, defined by it, and made extensions of it as they live, love, and serve God and his mission.

The Work of Christ

In the very moment Adam and Eve fell, God announced that the seed (esv, “offspring”) of the woman would one day crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15). In its broadest sense, this promise meant the human race would ultimately conquer Satan, but as revelation progressed, it became clear the victory would take place through one man, Jesus Christ. It was through the seed of Abraham that all nations would be blessed (Gen. 22:18), and in Galatians 3:16 Paul makes plain that the singular “seed” points to one person, Christ.

When the deliverer comes, however, he is not only the seed of the woman. He is also the Son of God (Gal. 4:4) and thus able to stand as the sole and exclusive Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), charged with restoring communion between God and humanity. Sensitive to the privileges of deity but no less sensitive to the interests of humanity, Christ alone could take on this role as Mediator, and for this task he was anointed. By virtue of this anointing, he bears the title “Messiah” or “Anointed One,” which occurs first in Psalm 2:2 and finds definitive fulfillment in the descent of the Spirit at his baptism (Mark 1:10).

There are three aspects to the work of the anointed Mediator.

Messianic Prophet

First, he is the messianic Prophet, specifically anointed for this task by the Spirit of the Lord (Luke 4:18, 21). At one level he stood in the succession of the OT prophets, but within that succession he was unique because in him God spoke no longer through a servant but through his Son (Heb. 1:1–2). As such, he alone knew the Father (Matt. 11:27), and even before his advent it was his Spirit who spoke in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11). But above all, he was God’s last word (Heb. 1:1–2), not merely through his own personal teaching ministry but also through what he continued to teach by his Spirit (John 16:13–14) through his apostles.

What Christ brought was not merely knowledge about redemption but the knowledge that is itself an essential part of redemption. Only the truth can set people free (John 8:32). Besides, Christ not only brought the truth. He was the truth, its living embodiment,

so that to see him was to see the Father (John 14:9). Nor was his prophetic ministry merely external. It was, and is, also internal. He opens hearts (Acts 16:14) and thus commands a hearing for the gospel.

Messianic Priest

Second, Jesus is the messianic Priest, representing men before God. Only the epistle to the Hebrews explicitly calls him a priest, but priestly functions such as sacrifice and intercession are clearly ascribed to him throughout the NT. Nevertheless, Hebrews gives us the deepest insight into his priesthood.

Hebrews emphasizes, first of all, that priesthood was an honor no one could simply take upon himself (Heb. 5:4). Behind Jesus' priesthood, therefore, lies a divine call (Heb. 5:5–6). This goes back to the eternal covenant (Heb. 13:20), of which Jesus was the mediator (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24) and surety (Heb. 7:22), and in which there was work given him to do (John 17:4), including the command to lay down his life (John 10:17–18). It was to secure the blessings promised in this covenant that he shed his blood (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20).

Second, Hebrews stresses Christ's priestly compassion. Having taken our nature, he became like us in every way, except for sin. He is thus able to help us in our trials (Heb. 2:18) and sympathize with us in our weaknesses (4:15).

Third, Hebrews says that Christ was not merely a priest, but a high priest: indeed, the High Priest, in whom all that was prefigured in the Aaronic priesthood found its fulfillment. The unique work of the high priest was that once a year, on the Day of Atonement, he went into the Most Holy Place, bearing an offering of blood to atone for his own and the people's sins. The writer to the Hebrews clearly sees this ritual as typifying the work of Christ.

But he also highlights the fundamental contrasts between Aaron and Christ. For example, whereas Aaron entered only an earthly tabernacle, the risen Jesus entered the heavenly one (Heb. 9:11–12) to appear in the real presence of God for us (9:24); whereas Aaron had first of all to make atonement for his own sins, Christ had no such need (7:28); whereas Aaron and his successors entered the Most Holy Place bearing only animal blood, Christ entered bearing his own blood (9:12);

and whereas the Aaronic high priests had to offer their sacrifices year after year, Christ's sacrifice was once and for all (7:27).

The effects of Christ's sacrifice are spelled out repeatedly throughout the NT. He expiated sin (took it away; John 1:29), thereby propitiating God (absorbing his wrath; Rom. 3:25; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2). He reconciled God to us, making peace by his blood shed on the cross (Col. 1:20). He redeemed us from the curse pronounced against us by the law, enduring the curse in our place (Gal. 3:13). He destroyed the Devil and delivered us from the fear of death (Heb. 2:14). He secured for us the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:14). And by his cross he revealed the love of the Father, which was so deep that it moved him to give his Son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 John 4:10).

The priestly work of Christ did not, however, end with the cross. It continues within the veil, where the risen Jesus "always lives" and is ever actively interceding for his people (Heb. 7:25; cf. Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:17, 24; 1 John 2:1).

Messianic King

Third, Christ is the messianic King. As the Son of David, he inherits his father David's throne (Luke 1:32); as the Son of Man, he has an everlasting kingdom (Dan. 7:27). He was born a king (Matt. 2:2), and during his earthly life even the wind and the waves obeyed him (Mark 4:41). But with his ascension his kingship entered a new phase. Now he stands at the center of his throne (Rev. 5:6), opening the scroll and turning the pages of history.

As King, Christ first has universal sovereignty. He has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), and this authority is closely linked to his mediatorial duties. It is because he has universal supremacy that he is able to give eternal life to those the Father has given him (John 17:2).

Second, Christ reigns in the hearts of his people. He opens their hearts (Acts 16:14), his grace rules within them (Rom. 5:21), and because they love him, they keep his commandments (John 14:15).

Third, Christ is the victorious conqueror who finally crushes

the serpent and fulfills the promise of Genesis 3:15. The decisive battle has already been fought on the cross, where Christ disarmed the evil powers (Col. 2:15), and in his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:54–57), but the final victory will come only when he returns in glory. Then our individual glorification will be consummated in the resurrection of our bodies (Phil. 3:21); the universe, too, will experience its own redemption. There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1), and the river of the water of life will flow forever out of the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1).