

## **What Do Christians Believe?**

**(Draft E)**

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# 1

## The Question

*What do Christians believe?*

In one way, it is the most natural of questions. Christianity, perhaps more than any of the world's other religions, has defined itself in terms of a distinctive set of beliefs. To become and be recognized as a Christian, one has to assent to particular beliefs. By contrast, a person can be Jewish simply by dint of being born of Jewish parents. Those parents might of course want their child to believe certain things – for example, that God made a covenant with Abraham and gave the Law through Moses – but if the child does not grow up to believe these things, or even becomes an atheist or a Buddhist, he or she is still considered Jewish. You can't be a Christian, though, just by having Christian parents. In fact, even belonging to a church doesn't make you a Christian. For example, there are probably a great many people who belong to Catholic, Baptist, Episcopal, or Methodist churches, but do not, or no longer, believe in God. And if you don't believe in God, you are clearly not a Christian. Being a Christian is not something you can inherit (like being Irish or Jewish), nor is it something you become just by joining an organization (like being a Democrat or a Jaycee).

Moreover, we can see how much *belief* matters to Christianity from the fact that, when Christians disagree with one another, it is often over matters of what to believe. You will probably know of at least one such division – the Reformation, which separated the Protestant churches from Roman Catholicism. This division within Christianity was not *only* about what to believe, but the various Protestant denominations that sprang up defined themselves, in part, by their beliefs, and by how these differed from those of Roman Catholics. Since that time, Protestant denominations have multiplied into the tens of thousands – in many cases dividing over matters of belief. Nor was the Reformation the first time Christians split from one another over matters of belief. **Such divisions will be the topic of Chapter [10].**

But such disagreements themselves give us reason to wonder whether it is really possible to answer the question, “What do Christians believe?” If there are something on the order of thirty thousand Christian denominations today, many of them distinguished by the details of what they believe, clearly they do not hold *all* of their beliefs in common. And of course it’s even worse than that: *within* any of these denominations, there are sure to be people who disagree with one another or dissent from the official beliefs of their denomination. If you were to approach the question, “What do Christians believe?” by way of a survey of all of the people who identify themselves as Christians, there might turn out to be few answers that everyone agreed upon, or even none at all.

But here we are at risk of confusing two kinds of questions. One is the sort of question that sociologists or statisticians would approach by doing a survey of a representative sample of people identified as Christian and asking them to

answer questions about what they believe on particular topics: *Do you believe there is a God? Do you believe that Jesus is God? Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead?* The researchers would then tabulate the results and present a statistical analysis: this percentage believe in God, that percentage believe Jesus rose from the dead, and so on. There are organizations like the Pew Foundation that do a great deal of research of this type about Christianity and other religions. It is interesting and important research, but these are not the kinds of questions that will be addressed in this book.

The other sort of question is the kind that might be asked by someone who wants to learn about Christianity – someone who knows Christians or knows about this religion called Christianity, and knows that there are particular beliefs that Christians consider central to their religion, but does not have a very clear idea of what these are. This is the audience for which this book is intended: inquirers, students approaching Christianity for the first time, and perhaps Christians who do not yet know very much about their faith. My aim is to explain what we might call the *core Christian beliefs* – the ones that Christians have historically held to be definitive of their faith. These are commitments shared by various types of Christians – Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and the world's various other denominations. There are indeed many further questions on which Christians are not all of one mind, [and I shall discuss a few of these in Chapter [10]]. But the main task of this book is to try to spell out this common core in distinction from a number of other things other people have believed: to explain how Christian beliefs differ

from those of atheists, Jews, pagans, and some of the influential philosophical schools.

## Overview

This book is divided into [eleven chapters]. Most of these deal with core Christian doctrines. Others deal with Christian religious practices, disagreements between Christians, and the fact that Christianity is divided into so many religious denominations. Here is a brief overview of the main points. (It is numbered for clarity, but the numbers do not correspond to chapter numbers.)

### **1) God created the world, and called everything he created good.**

Christians believe that the story told about the universe by the sciences is not the *whole* story about everything. The universe has not always existed, nor is its existence simply a matter of chance or something without further explanation. Rather, there is a God who created everything else that exists.

Moreover, God created the world *out of love* and created everything to be *good*. The Christian God is not the impersonal God imagined by the eighteenth-century deists, who thought that God created the world as a grand and beautiful machine and then allowed it to run its course. Nor is he like the capricious or even cruel gods of Greek and Babylonian religions, who are depicted as treating human beings as playthings or slaves. Nor is the material world inherently evil (as Gnostics – who will be discussed in Chapters [2 and 3] – believed) or even simply neutral (as

naturalists believe). Rather, the whole of creation, and everything in it, was created to be good.

## 2) The Human Condition

Human beings, like the rest of the creation, were created by God and pronounced good. But the account of creation in Genesis (the first book of the Bible) also says things about us that it does not say about anything else in creation. First, humans were created “in the image and likeness” of God. Second, after God created humans, he “breathed his spirit (or breath)” into us, something not said about other living creatures. Third, God appointed human beings as *stewards* of the rest of the Earth – as gardeners in God’s garden, giving us an important responsibility not shared by other creatures. And fourth, Genesis tells a story about how human beings *fell* from their original state of grace through their own choice, and the consequences this had for our circumstances and indeed our very nature. The image and likeness of God were distorted in us, and we are no longer exactly what God created us to be.

This is bound up with Christian notions of sin. I say “notions” in the plural because the word ‘sin’ is used to express more than one important theological idea. Some of these are about what we might call “personal sins” – the many bad things each of us does from time to time over the course of our lives. This is the most familiar notion of sin, and one that I expect that everyone has experienced in their own lives, both in things they themselves have done and in things that have been done to them by others. But for Christians, “sin” is not just a matter of the bad things people do. If it were, the remedy might lie simply in moral self-improvement

– bootstrapping ourselves towards goodness. But at various points in our lives, we are brought face to face with the fact that there are things about ourselves that we are unable to change. We keep doing the same harmful things, even though we know they are wrong and hate the fact that we keep doing them. As St. Paul eloquently puts it in his letter to the Christians in Rome, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me?” (Romans 7:19, 24)<sup>1</sup>

This “Romans 7 experience” is the doorstep to Christianity. The key distinctive doctrine of Christianity is *salvation*, or *being saved*. But the idea of being saved makes absolutely no sense unless we first find ourselves in a position that we feel a need to be saved *from*. The initial audience for Jesus’s message – Jews and “Greeks” (people in the lands Hellenized by Alexander the Great, particularly the non-Jewish inhabitants of the Roman Empire) – already knew this “bad news”, and so were ready and eager to hear the Christian “Good News”, which is what the word “Gospel” means. For modern readers, who may have grown up in a culture that operates under very different assumptions – that human nature is either entirely good or entirely evil, or that we are continually progressing towards goodness by our own power, or that we are just smart animals and hence neither good nor evil – the Christian Good News of salvation makes little sense until we have first come to grips with the *bad* news that we need to be saved. But this idea is fully intelligible. It is,

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<sup>1</sup> References such as these indicate the location of passages within the Bible, which are standardly broken down by numbered chapters and verses. “Romans 7:19”, for example, indicates the book of the New Testament entitled “Romans” (or “The Letter to the Romans”), book 7, verse 19. Most of the quotations used in this book are taken from the New Revised Standard translation of the Bible.

for example, one of the basic principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. But it is not limited to people who suffer from substance addictions: we all have some part of ourselves that we know is not right, and which we have not been able to *make* right. And so, if it is to change at all, we need God to come into our lives and make it right for us.

This is what Christians call “*original sin*”, an expression you may have heard in connection with the story of the fall of humanity and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden in the third chapter of Genesis. Whether or not the story of the fall in Genesis is interpreted as an *historical* story about two real individuals named Adam and Eve, it is a story about the condition we find ourselves in, and the condition that Christians believe Christ came into the world to set aright.

Christians believe that God cares deeply about the sorry state of humankind. The Christian God is not the god of the Deists, who stands aloof from Creation. Rather, the Bible is a story of God’s continual attempts to reconcile the world to himself, and to bring human beings back into loving relationship with him and one another. And this carries within it what might at first seem a paradox. On the one hand, God cares about *justice*. Indeed, the Bible says that God will judge both individuals and nations for their deeds, particularly how they treat the most vulnerable among them: the widow, the orphan, the poor, the stranger traveling in the land. On the other hand, God is also *loving and merciful*, and does not desire that anyone should perish, even those who have committed injustice. God wants to bring everyone into loving communion with himself, but he also wants all people to be just and righteous. But given the human condition as Christians understand it, this



is just what we are unable to do for ourselves: we cannot be wholly just and righteous. And so, if it were necessary to *first* become just and righteous before we could be saved – if we had to *earn* our salvation – our condition would be hopeless. If we are to be reconciled with God, it is God who must make the first move. And this is the picture of God that is consistently presented in the Bible: a God who abhors injustice, but is continually calling people to repentance and renewed relationship with him and one another, and promises to change our hearts for us.

### **3. God became human in Jesus of Nazareth and died for our sins that we might be saved.**

Here we come to the center of Christian doctrine – to the theme that separates Christianity from all other religions. Many religions have believed that the human condition is miserable and that people are sinners. Buddhists believe that the nature of human existence is suffering. Jews believe that all people are sinners, and that no one has fully kept God's law. The followers of the Greek philosopher Plato believed that our souls are temporarily trapped in the material world and corrupted by it. Many Gnostics believed that some people are intrinsically evil "children of darkness". Christians believe that we were created in God's image and likeness, but have fallen and need to be saved in order to be restored to what God intended and to live in loving communion with God and one another.

And Christians have a very particular view of how this is accomplished. Since we humans cannot make ourselves good and cannot ascend to God, God himself came down in human form to take away our sin, to impart something of his own nature to

us, to adopt us as his sons and daughters, and to draw us to himself. He did so in the life, death, and resurrection of an historical human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Christians believe that Jesus was both truly human and truly divine. He was not just a vision of God. He really lived, ate, slept, and was beaten, whipped, and nailed to a cross. He really died a human death. And he really rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. But Christians believe Jesus was truly God as well. As the first chapter of John's Gospel says, he was "with the Father in the very beginning" and "through him all things were made." He was not a man who *became* a god. He was, and is, God who became human without losing his divinity. And he is divine in a way that no other person is, or was, or ever will be.

This is the central mystery and scandal of the Christian faith: that God became human and suffered and died on our behalf. It is a *mystery* because we cannot fully understand it. It is a divine truth that goes beyond human understanding. It is a *scandal* because it goes against everything the natural human mind assumes about human beings and divinity. It was, in fact, *viewed* as scandalous by both Jews and pagans, for both of whom the idea of God (or a god) becoming human and suffering (much less dying) was unthinkable. But it was an idea that changed the world, and changed countless individual lives in the process.

Christians have tried to articulate ideas about *how* God's incarnation, death, and resurrection brought about the possibility of our salvation in a number of ways. I shall survey some of these in Chapter [6]. But in my opinion, none of them can do full justice to the mysteries of the incarnation (God becoming human), crucifixion,

and resurrection. These are things that exceed human language and understanding, even though they may move the human heart to accept them as saving truth.

This is the Christian doctrine of salvation: that in Christ we are offered forgiveness of our sins, adoption as God's children, and a new life that will not end when our bodies perish. Salvation is a *free gift*. It is not something we can buy or earn or accomplish through our own efforts. But it is also, like any other gift, something we must *receive* if we are to enjoy its benefits.

#### **4. Sanctification: God calls us to holiness and to “put on the nature of Christ”**

The Christian doctrine of *salvation* is that, in Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are given a new life. But salvation is neither the *end* nor the *sum total* of the Christian Good News, but only the beginning. Remember that what we are being saved *from* is our sinful, fallen condition. One part of this salvation is a *pardon*, if you will, for sin, and *adoption* as God's own children and heirs. But God does not simply want to *pardon* us, he wants us to grow in virtue and to become like Christ. Just as the fall corrupted our nature, twisting and distorting the image and likeness of God in us, what comes after salvation is a process of straightening out our nature, and indeed transforming us into the nature of Christ. As the first letter of St. John puts it: “See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called ‘children of God’. And that's what we are. As to what we shall be, we do not know what we will be like, but we know that we shall be like Him [i.e., Christ], for we shall see Him as He is.” (1 John 3: 1-2)

What Christianity promises is not simply a pardon for sin, but a transformation of our sinful nature into a glorified and Godly nature. We shall be like Christ. This is the Christian doctrine of *sanctification* (being made holy). As John says, we do not know in advance just what this will be like. It will doubtless be something very different from human nature as we know it, though perhaps we have a glimpse of it in some saintly individuals, and of course in Christ Himself.

## 5. Christian Spiritual Practice

The Bible is not like a how-to manual. It does not tell us step-by-step how we are to proceed in this journey of sanctification. In part, this is because it is *not* something we can do on our own. The Christian view is that God the Father sends his Holy Spirit upon us once we have received Christ, and the Holy Spirit leads us in the way of holiness, transforming us into the likeness of Christ. The particulars of this may be very different from person to person, as is readily evident by looking at the diversity of personalities and types of holy lives found in the lives of the saints.

But Christians have, over the years, developed practices aimed at living a godly life. From earliest times, Christians were encouraged to be regular in prayer and to meet together with their Christian brothers and sisters each week to worship God together. They were exhorted to live pure and virtuous lives and to put away sinful practices. And they were exhorted to practice love and works of kindness and mercy. Over the years, the Church has developed recommendations for *how* to worship, pray, wean ourselves away from sin, and practice virtue, love, and kindness. While Christians do not believe that these can be effective without God's

grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they are regarded as instruments of grace through which a believer can cooperate with God in the process of spiritual growth and sanctification.

## **6. The Church**

Some Christians emphasize salvation at the expense of sanctification. And some view both purely in terms of a *personal* relationship with God. And in some ways this is right: having a personal relationship with God is central and indispensable to the Christian life. But it is important not to view this through the lens of a modern Western individualism. Jesus did *not* call people simply as individuals. He called them to become communities, and indeed to regard one another as family – as “brothers and sisters” in Christ. The Bible even goes so far as to describe this collective community, the Church, as “the body of Christ”. In part, this means that individual Christians, like the different parts of the human body (hands, feet, eyes) need one another to truly be alive. And in part, it means that it is through the Church that Christ’s ministry is still alive in the world. These claims are, in a way, hard enough for us to deal with. They mean that being a Christian requires us to be part of a community not wholly of our choosing, and that each of us is individually incomplete and in need of others.

But there is also another element to the idea of the Church as Christ’s body. This is expressed in Jesus’ Parable of the Vine in John 15, wherein he compares himself to a vine, and those who believe in him to the branches of the vine. The branches can be alive only if they are connected to the vine. If we remove ourselves from the vine,

we wither and die. If we “abide in” the vine, we bear much fruit. This is a powerful teaching, especially in light of modern realizations that when two plants are grafted together in this way, they are changed at the level of their DNA. In it we have a deep metaphor for how we are transformed into Christ’s likeness: it is as though our deepest nature – our “spiritual DNA” – is rewritten through participation in Christ’s body.

The Church (in the capitalized form, meaning Christ’s body in the world, throughout the ages) is in a complicated relationship with the many churches (small ‘c’), in the sense of institutionalized Christian congregations and denominations. Our many churches are only imperfect expressions of the Church. This is only to be expected, as the individuals who make up those churches, including their leaders, are all still somewhere along the road to sanctification. Individual churches have often given glorious expression to the Church, but at times they have also acted in ways that are contrary to what it is to be Church as well. And when they do so, they can alienate people from the Christian Gospel. Being part of the Church, the Body of Christ, generally requires being part of some local expression of the Church, in the form of a community of Christian believers. But no such community is perfect, and it is a challenge to be an imperfect Christian in an imperfect church.

## **7. One Church, Thirty Thousand Denominations, Two Billion Christians**

Christian theologians and the Christian Bible tend to speak of the Church as an indivisible unity. Yet clearly there are many groups of Christians in the world who are divided from one another. There are something on the order of **thirty** thousand

Christian denominations in the world today, and some of them do not even recognize one another as Christian. How are we to understand this?

Ultimately, the answer will require us to look at the history of Christianity. In some cases, groups of Christians split apart because of differences in what they believed. Some of the early splits (or *schisms*) were very much over disputes about such questions as whether Jesus was both divine and human. Issues about belief also played a role in the Reformation, which was the beginning of the Protestant churches that make up most of that large number of denominations. But most of the surviving *old* divisions in the Church were probably at their core more a result of people living in different parts of the world, under different rulers, and speaking different languages. If you were asked to name as many Christian denominations as you could, you would probably think of Roman Catholicism, a few Protestant denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Baptist), and perhaps Eastern Orthodoxy. All of these are descendants of Christianity as it was found within the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was itself a very large place at its height, so much so that its leaders actually decided it was best to split it into two parts – a Western Empire (where Latin was the official language) and an Eastern Empire (where Greek was). The Church in the Western Empire became what we call Catholicism, and it was from this that the Protestant reformers broke off. The Church in the Eastern Empire became what we call Eastern Orthodoxy. But even by the end of the first century, there were already Christians in places outside of the Roman Empire, like Ethiopia, Persia, and perhaps even India. They spoke different languages and had relatively little contact with Roman Christians. There are a small

number of denominations that are in fact very ancient Christian traditions that developed in places that were separated from Roman Christianity by distance, language, and politics, and it is only natural that they would develop in slightly different ways, and as autonomous churches. If anything, it is remarkable that the theological differences between them are not far greater than they are. For the most part, the things they disagree about are things that only a theologian would understand or appreciate.

But most of the world's denominations are a result of the Protestant Reformation. This is in part because, once Christians started thinking of themselves in more particular terms – as Calvinists, Lutherans, or Baptists – because of the ways their beliefs differed from one another, it was probably impossible to keep the process from continuing, with each group that found itself with distinctive beliefs deciding to organize as its own denomination. But the truly astonishing number of denominations only begins to make sense when you realize that *some* of the Protestant denominations decided that *any* large organizational structure was a bad idea, and that each local congregation should operate as an autonomous body. Many of those thirty thousand denominations are made up of a single church congregation, or just a few. Some may have some very distinctive religious beliefs and practices, but the decision to operate as a denomination need not be based in having distinctive theological beliefs at all, but only in having the idea that being a denomination is simply a matter of whom you choose to associate with. I do not mean to suggest that the world's two billion Christians all believe exactly the same



things, but the staggering number of denominations does not mean that they all have distinctively different religious beliefs.

Nevertheless, Christians tend to be uneasy about the fact that the one Church is divided into so many denominations. Many feel this is a kind of scandal – that it means that Christians are doing something fundamentally wrong, and need to reunite into a single institutional Church. Others feel that the many forms of Christian community are in fact necessary, as no one form could fully encompass the infinite mystery of God's love.

## 2

### **Creation: God Created the World and Pronounced it Good**

There is more than one place we could begin a discussion of what Christians believe. But one good place to begin is with what Christians regard as “the Beginning” with a capital ‘B’: the creation of the world by God. The Christian understanding of creation shapes a great deal of how Christians understand God and God’s relation to human beings and the physical universe. And so we shall begin by looking at the narrative of the creation of the world that comes in the first two chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation,

plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. (Genesis 1:1–2:3, RSV)

This passage is among both the most beautiful and the most familiar in the Bible. Depending on what translation of the Bible you are used to, you may have

heard it in slightly different language, but the imagery will likely be familiar. Having read such a passage, there are many different ways we might proceed to discuss it. In a Bible study, for example, people might go around the room and share what caught their attention in the passage and what they felt in response. At a professional conference or a graduate school seminar, scholars might debate fine points of the original language, or variations in the ancient copies of the text, or relations between the Genesis story and other stories of creation like the Babylonian creation myth.

What I wish to do is slightly different. My task here is to convey a bare-bones account of what Christians believe about creation. My method here will be to focus on things in the text that have been central to Christian belief over the centuries, and to try to clarify them by contrasting them with a number of other things that the passage is *not* saying – things that we might find in other religions and philosophies that are different from the Christian view.

The very first sentence contains a great deal to think about:

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth.*

There is a crucially important central claim here: that the heavens and the Earth were all made by God. In a way, it seems like a straightforward claim, even if it is not a claim that everyone would believe. But if it seems like a straightforward claim to you (regardless of whether you view it as true or false), that is very likely due to

the fact that you already live in a culture where the idea of God and the idea that the world might have had a beginning are taken for granted. But these are ideas that would have been foreign to many people in other times and places. So let us try to unpack this sentence and contrast it with some alternative possibilities.

**1. *There is a God who created the heavens and the Earth.***

If you grew up reading the Bible, this may seem so natural that it is hard to recognize that it is not *obvious*. But to many people, it has been anything *but* obvious. Indeed, what may have seemed obvious to many people might have been some alternatives like the following:

1a. *Atheism*: There is no God, and hence no God who created the heavens and the Earth.

At least in the Western world, atheism (from the Greek *theos*/god and the prefix *a-*, indicating “not”) was not a very widespread view until sometime in the eighteenth century. But since that time, particularly in Europe and to a lesser extent in North America, it has become a very popular view. Most of the founders of early modern science were Christians or at least theists (that is, people who believe in God or in gods, though not necessarily in all of the particular things Christians believe about God); but during the eighteenth century Enlightenment, things began to change.

Whereas Isaac Newton had said that his greatest wish for his system of physics was

to lead people to believe in God, the next great physicist after Newton, Pierre-Simon Laplace, when asked by Napoleon what place God played in *his* physics, replied “I had no need of that hypothesis.” The most obvious alternative to belief in God is the belief that there is no such being – that is, atheism. An atheist may or may not have a view on how or why the universe came into being – science can only trace things back to the first seconds of the world we know, and not why there was a “Big Bang” or what if anything came before that – but what the atheist denies is that it is all the work of an all-powerful intelligent being.

1b. *Paganism/Polytheism*: There are many gods – i.e., very powerful spiritual beings.

Like Christianity, the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam, are monotheistic – that is, they believe in one (*monos*) God (*theos*). But the monotheistic religions developed in the midst of surrounding cultures whose religions were polytheistic – that is, religions that believed in multiple gods. We find such religions mentioned both in the Bible and in the ancient literature and myths of Europe and the Middle East. These were the religions of the people who lived in the places where first Judaism and then Christianity developed, and they are prominently mentioned in the Bible and early Christian history. In fact, the original words for God in the Bible, such as *el* and *elohim* in Hebrew and *theos* in Greek, were originally words that had been used by polytheists for the deities they believed in,

and were taken up by Jews and Christians as words to refer to the one God in which they believed.

Western readers will probably be most familiar with the gods of Greek and Roman mythology, who are very similar to one another, though Greeks and Romans gave them different names. Some of the Greek gods that readers may have heard of are Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Ares, Aphrodite, Athena, and Poseidon. These are also called the “Olympian gods,” because in the myths they are said to reside on Mount Olympus. The Olympian gods were indeed viewed as the most powerful beings in the universe in Greek religion, but they did not create the earth or the cosmos. Indeed, they were the children of an older race of beings called the titans: Chronos (time), Gaia (Earth), Uranus (or *Oouranos*, the Greek word for the heavens). In the Greek myths, Chronos was the father of the Olympian gods and attempted to wipe them out by eating them, but Zeus escaped this fate and forced Chronos to disgorge the rest, and the Olympian gods then defeated and imprisoned the titans. Greek mythology does not have a single authoritative source like the Bible, but in some versions of the myths, the story of creation goes back even further, with the titans themselves being the products of even more primal forces of order and chaos. None of the whole lot of them seems particularly concerned about what we think of as “the world”, and it remains unpopulated until Zeus delegates Prometheus (*forethought*) and Epimetheus (*afterthought*) to make humans and animals, respectively. Prometheus manages to steal fire from Olympus and give it to human beings. But when the gods discover what he has done – note that the Olympian gods

are not omniscient! – Zeus is terribly unhappy. He assigns Prometheus an everlasting and terrible punishment, and forms a grudge against human beings.

Whereas the God of Genesis spoke the entire world into being through an orderly process and called it good, the Greek gods are themselves descendants of the heavens and the Earth, even though (after their defeat of the Titans) they are the most powerful beings within them. And while they are credited with the creation of humans and animals, they do so through lesser intermediaries, as a kind of afterthought, and in such a fashion that Zeus, at least, conceives a hatred for humans from the outset. In contrast to the Genesis story, the Greek gods are not depicted as creating the universe, and the things in the universe are not described as being good. (But neither are they described as being evil – they simply exist.) And if one reads Greek mythology or epic, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that, at least from the perspective of human beings, the gods are mostly a pretty bad lot. Ares is always starting wars, Zeus raping women and boys, and the poet Homer describes the ten-year war with Troy as a consequence of the vanity and jealousy of gods and goddesses.

The Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma Elish* – one of the oldest stories we know of – bears a number of similarities to the Greek myths. It depicts generations of gods who war with one another. A younger god (Marduk) gains supremacy by killing one of the most powerful of the older gods (Tiamut). And in the Babylonian myth, the heavens and Earth are formed by Marduk carving up Tiamut's carcass and making sky and Earth out of its parts. Human beings, in turn, are created largely to be slaves to the Babylonian gods. In the Babylonian narrative, the world we see



around us is indeed described as resulting from actions of the gods, but it is made from something that existed before (the body of Tiamut).

In the polytheistic religions of Europe and the Near East, there is not a supreme being who created everything, and the gods who are the primary objects of mythology and worship are themselves beings that had a beginning. (In the case of the Greek creation myth, they are younger than the heavens and the Earth; in the Babylonian myth, they are older, but are not the oldest generation of gods.) The gods of the polytheistic religions are often associated with powerful natural forces (Zeus and Thor with lightning and thunder, Apollo and many gods in various religions with the Sun), or with themes of human life (such as love and war), or with particular places (like the Canaanite gods mentioned in the Old Testament). They were regarded as having great influence within the world, but were conceived as existing *within* the world – perhaps intertwined with its very fabric – rather than as a being that called the world itself into existence.

1c. *Cosmological Dualism*: There are equal and opposite primal forces of good and evil, or of order and chaos.

While Jews and Christians believe in one God and polytheists believe in many, one important ancient Near Eastern religion, Manicheanism, took the simpler view that there are two equal and opposite forces, one associated with good, light, and order, the other with evil, darkness, and chaos. There is a popular misunderstanding of Christianity that sees it (and Judaism) as taking a similarly

dualistic view: that God and Satan are equal and opposing forces of good and evil, light and darkness. But this is a misunderstanding. With a few exceptions, Christians have held that there is one God, who is good and unrivalled in His power. Satan is not the opposite of God, but is himself a created being – a powerful angel who freely chose to become evil and oppose the will of God and to corrupt God's other creatures. (In Medieval angelology, the counterpart of Satan is not God, but the Archangel Michael.) Christian doctrine holds that Satan and all of the demons were not only created by God, but created good, and became evil through their own choice.

We should, however, say something about the exceptions. There are over two billion living human beings who identify as Christians, and of course the historical total can only be higher than that. Even where there is official doctrine shared by the major Christian churches, that does not mean that every individual Christian knows or accepts the official doctrine. And, at least in my experience, the idea that Satan is supposed to be a kind of anti-God, rather than a fallen angel, is one of the departures from official doctrine that many people often end up falling into, even if they were taught the "theologically correct" view in their religious education. Somehow, the idea that there are equal and opposite ultimate forces of good and evil seems to be easier for the mind to grasp than the more theologically-correct ideas that God has no rival and that evil is not a separate cosmic force, but a corruption of goodness. And in terms of Christian doctrine, this issue (or something very close to it) was in fact one of the first and most important issues that had to be fought out early in the formation of Christian doctrine. Many of the early converts to

Christianity in the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries seem to have been familiar with a form of moral dualism called Gnosticism, and tried to develop a form of Christianity along these lines. One Christian leader named Marcion (85-160 CE) went so far as to teach that the God presented in the Hebrew scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament) was really the Devil, and that the world we see around us is in fact his evil creation. (If you think about all the bad things that go on in the world, you can see how he could have been drawn to this conclusion.) The issues between Marcion and the rest of Christianity thus involved not only Christianity's relationship with Judaism and its scriptures, but also how to view Creation itself – as a good creation of God or an evil creation of Satan. Marcion was excommunicated (formally cast out) from the Church for his views, and the movement that followed him declared a heresy (literally, a group that has separated, though the term generally indicates a separation on the basis of a difference in fundamental beliefs).

1d. *Pantheism*: God is the universe.

Still others have believed in an infinite being – a god or God – but denied that the universe is something *apart* from God that was created. Rather, they hold that the universe in some sense *is* God – perhaps the *body* of God. Such a view occurs in a variety of forms, ranging from religions that see God as immanent in all of nature to the abstract philosophical pantheism of the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. For pantheists, everything in the universe is, in essence, a part of

God or an expression of God, rather than a piece of Divine handiwork. Not only are you and I in some sense part of the Divine, but so are worms and rocks and viruses.

### 1e. *Emanationism*

I shall conclude the list with a view that is a bit harder to characterize and to distinguish from other views. Christianity views the universe we see as something separate from God and made by God. Pantheism holds that there is nothing but God, and hence everything that exists is somehow part of God or an expression of God. Somewhere in-between there is another view, sometimes called *emanationism*. Think of the relationship between the Sun and its rays. Once the rays depart from the Sun, they are no longer exactly part of the Sun proper; but insofar as they are rays of the Sun, they are not something completely distinct from it either. Moreover, the Sun does not *decide* to emit rays of light as a special act of creating light; rather, by its very nature it emanates light. Some religious and philosophical thinkers have held that something like this is a better metaphor for God's relationship to the world: that God does not so much *decide* to make things that are completely separate from Himself (like a potter making a clay pot) as by His very nature gives off *being* that we see in the form of created things.

Emanationism is a view that is usually found in a highly thought-out philosophy or theology rather than in popular religion. In the West, we find it in some strands of Neo-Platonism (a brand of philosophy that was influential in late antiquity), and it was also influential in some strands of Islamic philosophy and

theology in the Middle Ages. I also tend to think we see something like it in the Hindu story that the universe was the result of the ejaculation of the god Brahma. (Apparently, like ancient and medieval Europeans, some of the ancient people of India believed that babies come from the seed of the father.) Brahma's seed is no longer Brahma himself, but it is something that was once part of him, rather than something he made, and so, while not based in a metaphor like rays of light emanating from the sun, it is a story that also suggests that the universe is something *given off* by a deity.

One way of characterizing what is special about the Christian view of creation – and in this case, it is a view shared by Jews and Moslems – is that the primary distinction is between God and *everything else*. Everything else, including human beings, is *not* God, but was *created* by God. And there are two basic ways that other views can differ from the Christian view. The first is to deny the existence of a God who is distinct from the world, whether by denying that there are any supernatural beings (atheism), or by viewing such supernatural beings as in some sense *within* the world (which seems to be the case for most of the polytheistic gods). The second is to put other things in addition to God into the category of uncreated beings, whether by supposing there are two supreme beings, one good and one evil (cosmic dualism), or by supposing that many gods, angels, demons, and perhaps even our own souls are eternal and uncreated, and existed before the foundation of the world.

## **2. *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth.***

The Genesis narrative implies that the universe we see around us had a beginning, and that God is, in some sense, prior to the universe. For Christians, the universe did not always exist. God existed without it, and presumably need not have created it. Again, it may seem self-evident that the world must have had a beginning. But when you think about it, this sounds like it implies a time before the beginning, which seems a bit paradoxical. And there have been important contrary views.

### *2a. Aristotle's Everlasting Universe*

One such view is found in the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE), one of the great minds of Western philosophy. Aristotle's view was that the universe has always existed and will always continue to exist in the same general state we find it today. Moreover, Aristotle also held that animal and vegetable species are everlasting as well: every type of organism that exists today has always existed, and will never cease to exist. There could be no evolution or extinction of species. But even if you do not think that the universe always existed with the same stock of things we find in it today, you could still think that it had no beginning. In fact, in the twentieth century, the eminent British astronomer Fred Hoyle championed such a view, called the Steady State Theory, as an alternative to the Big Bang, which he thought smacked too much of Biblical creation.

### 2b. *Eternal Recurrence*

Other ancient philosophers, both Eastern and Western, believed in a doctrine of “eternal recurrence”, in which the universe (or rather an infinite succession of universes) has begun and ended many times, stretching into the infinite past and extending into the infinite future. This view was revived in the nineteenth century by the German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche, and some contemporary physicists believe that the universe we know is one in a series of universes, in which the Big Bang was preceded by the collapse of a prior universe. Such a view is compatible with holding that there is a God who stands outside the cycles of the universe, but it is also compatible with pantheism and atheism, and with the types of pagan stories surveyed above, in which the gods are products of processes within each cycle.

### 2c. *The Universe Predates the Gods*

As we have seen, the Greek and Babylonian myths locate the origin of their gods *within* the mythic past. Their gods do not predate the universe, but exist within it. They may be able to inhabit parts of the universe (“the heavens”) that we do not, but they do not stand *outside* the universe, as does the God of Genesis.

## 3. *Order from Chaos*

The creation narrative in Genesis seems to involve three main stages. In the first, God creates “the heavens and the Earth”, but originally “the Earth was without form

and void”. God then brings this chaotic universe into order over the “six days” of Creation, beginning with the creation of light, and concluding with the creation of living organisms, including human beings. This is the second stage. When this is done, there is a third stage, in which an ordered Cosmos is complete, and God rests from his labors.

The idea that the universe was originally in a state of chaos is a common one in creation stories. (In many of them, chaos is still an abiding force in the world today and that the world we observe is a mixture of order and chaos. Many of Plato’s followers, for example, held that matter is inherently chaotic and resistive to order.) The Genesis narrative is special, however, in locating the One God as *both* the origin of everything that exists *and* the One who brought it from its initial chaotic form into the ordered state in which we experience it. By contrast, some of the polytheistic religions had some gods that were essentially active forces of chaos. And in the creation myth in Plato’s *Timaeus*, a divine being called the Demiurge (meaning *craftsman*) fashions the world we know by applying principles of pre-existing rational order to an equally pre-existing but previously unorganized body of matter. But, because matter is inherently chaotic, the application cannot be perfect, and as a result, rational souls (like ours) are continually frustrated by the world of matter so long as they inhabit material bodies.

#### **4. “And God saw that it was good.”**

This phrase – “God saw that it was good” – is repeated at the end of each day of the Genesis narrative. (Though it is *not* said after God created the heavens and the



Earth until he began to give it form.) This is a crucial Christian doctrine: that everything that God created, God created good. Again, this may seem obvious: if God is himself good, surely he would create nothing that was not good. Yet there have been important alternatives.

#### *4a. Cosmological/Moral Dualism*

Recall, first, the kind of cosmic dualism we have already discussed that was espoused by the Manichees and the Gnostics. On this view, there are primal forces in the universe that are inherently evil. This is both a cosmic and a moral dualism. Some such moral dualists have held that we human beings contain a mixture of good and evil. Others have held that some of us are “children of light” and others “children of darkness” – features of our intrinsic natures rather than products of our free choice or of a nature that was originally good but is now corrupted. For them, some people are good by nature and others evil by nature, and the universe itself is a mixture of things that are inherently good and others that are inherently evil.

#### *4b. Matter is Evil (and so is the human body)*

One of the first doctrinal struggles that Christians faced came from groups calling themselves Gnostics – people who claim to have special esoteric knowledge (*gnosis* in Greek). Gnosticism has caught the public attention in recent years with the re-discovery of ancient writings, some Christian, some Jewish, and still others

pagan, exploring Gnostic ideas. Very recently, it has become somewhat of a fad with the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, a work of utter fiction which takes some ideas from early Gnostic Christian writings. The fact that there were non-Christian Gnostics shows that Gnosticism was not entirely a Christian phenomenon, nor a Christian sect, but a separate intellectual/religious current in late antiquity. There were, however, people who considered themselves both Christian and Gnostic.

One of the main currents of Gnostic thought is the idea that the material world is evil, and indeed is at very least an important source of other evils, perhaps even the only source of evil. And in particular, the human body is evil. It is the body, after all, that produces sinful desires like lust, anger, greed, and the desire for power over others. And if one believes that the body is evil, there are two possible implications one might proceed to draw. On the one hand, some Gnostics believed, along with some of the Greek philosophical schools like the Platonists, that we ought to do everything we can to separate ourselves from the body and its desires. They were inclined to strong forms of asceticism, practicing celibacy and fasting. On the other hand, other Gnostics held that, when we die, we will naturally be freed from this prison of the body and all of its corrupting effects. If this is the case, then what we do with our bodies ultimately does not matter. People who took this view tended to be morally permissive, as they held that things like adultery and drunkenness could not harm the soul, but only the body. They viewed the body as something like a piece of expendable clothing, whose cleanliness was not particularly important, because it would soon be discarded in any case.

Unlike some other historical heresies, Christian Gnosticism was one that had obvious and important implications for how a Christian should live in the world. It was also in outright contradiction with the first chapter of Genesis, where it is said that the whole material world was created good. One of the first decisions of mainstream Christianity was to reject the extreme other-worldly character of Gnosticism, and to embrace the world (and the human body) as God's good creations.

Unfortunately, the idea that the body and perhaps even the entire material world is evil is one that seems to spring up anew in every generation. Indeed, there are no doubt millions of Christians who were taught in Sunday School or in sermons from the pulpit that the world and the body are evil, in contradiction to Genesis 1. And Christian doctrine on this matter is admittedly a bit subtle. Christians *do* speak of "the world" as being evil, and the body as a source of evil. But they do not mean that the physical universe is evil. What they mean by "the world" here is the network of sin and manipulation, the way of life in which we are enslaved by our bodily desires and social attachments to the exclusion of all else. Christians believe that the universe we inhabit – and we ourselves, including our bodies – are created good, yet also *fallen* from the original state of goodness in which we were created, an idea to be explored in Chapter [4].

4c. Nature is itself neither good nor evil, but is simply *natural*

In our modern, scientific age, it is tempting to think of the moral sphere as something entirely separate from nature. A mere physical object, in itself, would seem to be neither good nor evil. (Advertisements for the gun lobby, for example, tell us that “guns don’t kill people; people kill people.”) Indeed, it is not clear that it makes sense to apply the word ‘evil’ even to non-human animals. A wolf or a shark may be *dangerous* or *aggressive*, but it is merely acting out its own biological nature, and we would be wrong to impute moral fault to it. Where, then, do notions like good and evil come from, and where are they properly applied?

A first important point is to distinguish different uses of words like ‘good’ and ‘evil’. On the one hand, they can be used to express *moral* categories – for example, we say that what the Nazis did to the victims of the Holocaust was evil. (A plague that killed a similar number of people would be disastrous, but not evil.) Moral categories apply only to particular kinds of things: people, the actions people perform, and the motivations out of which they perform them. On the other hand, we also call a much wider variety of things “good” and “bad” (and occasionally even “evil”) in terms of their *effects*. A bountiful harvest is “good” in the sense that it contributes to the thriving of humans and other creatures, whereas a famine is “bad” in that it causes death and misery. Such notions are relative to *our interests*. They may, nonetheless, be *objective*, in the sense that there is a fact of the matter about what is helpful or harmful, even if we do not recognize it. (For example, a policy-maker might *think* some economic or agricultural policy will be useful for providing enough food for the population, and find that it turns out to do the opposite. Even if she refuses to acknowledge that the policy was harmful, it *was* harmful nonetheless.

Whether people eat or starve is a matter of fact and not of taste or opinion.) Still other things are called “good” or “bad” in relation to personal taste. I like white chocolate and so I call it “good” while you dislike it and call it “bad” or “horrid”. In this sort of case, there is no fact of the matter beyond personal taste. This is the kind of “goodness” that we properly describe as subjective.

Yet it is not clear that any of these categories allows us to make sense of the repeated passage, “and God saw that it was good” in Genesis 1. The sun, the Earth, the non-human animals are neither morally good nor morally evil. They are not beings to which moral categories apply at all. Nor are they unambiguously good *for* us. We need the Sun, but too much time in the Sun can also cause heatstroke or cancer. Nor do we share the same tastes: one person finds spiders loathsome while another finds them beautiful. So whatever kind of “goodness” is being attributed to each stage of Creation, it cannot be the kind of moral goodness that applies only to agents and their actions, nor can it mean that what was created had only beneficial applications to us.

What the language seems to imply is that each created thing is, in some sense, “good” *in its own right*, simply by existing, as opposed to being good in terms of what it *does* or *does for us*. One way of interpreting this is to see it as implying that each created thing has a kind of *intrinsic worth* that is not reducible to whether it is *useful to us* or to whether we *in fact value it*. We are used to thinking of ourselves and other people in this way, even if we do not always do so consistently. A good mother sees her children as each being intrinsically important. They are not just important *to her* – they would continue to be just as precious even if everyone who

in fact cared about them passed away. (Indeed, we feel compassion for orphans so poignantly precisely because we recognize an intrinsic value in them as people that is not acknowledged and nurtured in the fashion that it deserves to be.) And, depending on how carefully we think about it and how compassionate we are, we think of people in general, not just those who are close to us, as having a kind of intrinsic worth – indeed, as each having the same kind of intrinsic worth we see in ourselves and in those we love. Those of us who have had pets that we loved perceive them as having intrinsic worth as well, and some people have the same kind of attitude towards all living things. This is a difficult attitude to cultivate beyond those closest to us, and we find it easier to do with some things than with others. When I come upon a magnificent ancient tree, I easily find myself *appreciating* it as something that is intrinsically valuable, and I find myself mourning the loss when such a tree dies or is wantonly cut down. I find it more difficult to appreciate spiders. I have always found them somewhat disturbing and frightening, with all those eyes and legs and fangs; and if only a few of them are really dangerous to me, I am not sure I really trust my ability to distinguish the poisonous ones from the innocuous ones. But I cannot help but admire the beautiful webs some of them build, and perceive them as homes that have been carefully constructed. And I am moved to see that one of the more frightening-looking local species, the wolf spider (which is rather large and hairy), carries its babies upon its back until they can fend for themselves. The better I come to know them, the more I appreciate them as things that are marvelous in their own way, and deserving of appreciation.

It is tempting to see the phrase “and God saw that it was good” as implying a similar conclusion on a much broader scale: that *everything* God created is somehow valuable in its own right and in the eyes of God. It is a matter of some pain to me that, since the Industrial Revolution, many Christians have begun to see the created world as “good” only in the sense of being there for us to use as raw materials out of which to build things to consume. This, too, strikes me as being in conflict with Genesis. On the one hand, each stage of creation is called “good” before human beings even come into the story. The earth, sea, sky, plants, and animals are all called good in their own right. On the other hand, the Genesis narrative does indeed say that humans are given “dominion” over the rest of the Earthly creation; but Genesis 2 (which we will examine later) makes it clear that this is in the role of something like a *gardener*. A gardener may indeed grow vegetables to eat and flowers that are beautiful to the eye, but does so by caring for the plants themselves, and working with their natures, rather than treating them as merely raw materials for the satisfaction of human appetites.

If we interpret the phrase “and God saw that it was good” in this way, it also invites a further conclusion: that God created, not just us, but every part of His Creation, out of love. Love is the capacity through which we appreciate the intrinsic worth and dignity of people and other things. And if we assume that God knew what he was doing in creating the world, we must assume that he did not merely create things on a whim and then *discover* that they were good, but that he created them in order to bring things of intrinsic value into the world. Christians in fact believe that “God is love”. (1 John 4:8) And with this belief in hand, we can see the Creation

narrative in a new light, and one which distinguishes it from many of the alternative views of the universe. For Christians, the world is not simply a by-blow of some cosmic conflict between the gods or some primordial unexplained *fact*. It is a product of an act of wise and creative love, and all that God created is precious and good. *We* were not created so that the Babylonian gods might have slaves. We, too, were created out of Divine love, and were appointed to be stewards and caretakers of a portion of the world God created.

### **5. Humans are created “in the image and likeness” of God**

The final striking thing to note about this creation story is what it says about human beings. We are said to be made in “the image and likeness” of God, and to have been given “dominion” over everything else that lives on the face of the Earth. These are things that are said *uniquely* about human beings. And they are hard to understand. What does it mean to be made in God’s “image and likeness”? Clearly it means, among other things, that we were *made* by God. We did not create ourselves, or spring spontaneously into being, or emerge purely out of an unplanned natural process. Nor were we made by some lesser spirits, as in the Greek creation myth. But this language of “image and likeness” is cryptic, and requires some interpretation. Likewise, what does it mean to exercise “dominion” over other living things? It doesn’t sound like it is necessarily a *good* thing, as it sounds like it means *dominating* non-human animals and the rest of the created world; but, given the rest



of the Creation story, we have to suppose that we are meant to find a way to interpret it as a good thing.

These topics we will take up in the next chapter, where we turn to what the Bible says about human beings.

### 3

## **Image and Likeness, Dust and Spirit**

In the last chapter, in discussing the account of creation in Genesis 1, we briefly discussed the creation of human beings. But there are in fact *two* accounts of the creation of human beings in Genesis. The first, which we saw in the previous chapter, comes in the description of the sixth day of creation in Genesis 1. It tells how God made human beings, male and female, in his image and likeness, and gave them “dominion...over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth.” This is the culmination of the act of creation described in the Genesis 1, as God rested from his labors on the seventh day.

Curiously, the story of the seven days of creation is immediately followed by a second account of the creation of human beings in Genesis 2. This story, which leads into the story of the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 and the rest of the Genesis narrative, reads as follows (with some verses not directly concerned with the creation of human beings left out):

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

...

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

It may initially seem puzzling that the Chapter 2 of Genesis tells a second story of the creation of humanity. It would be particularly odd if we were to assume that Genesis 2 is supposed to continue the narrative where Genesis 1 left off – that these were events that happened *after* the completion of creation. If we read it that way, it would appear that God created humanity *twice*, and that would indeed make little sense. Things make much better sense if we look at them as two different stories which overlap in saying something about the creation of humanity. Each

says important things about human beings and our relationship to God. The first locates our creation within the larger context of God's creation of the universe. The second is a part of a narrative that stretches into Genesis 3, which tells a story of how humanity, in the persons of Adam and Eve, fell from their original state of grace and close relationship with God and were cast out of the garden and into a much more hostile world. Most Biblical scholars would say that the two were probably originally separate stories that were later compiled into the larger book we call Genesis. But even if they were written by a single author, it would have interrupted the narrative flow of the Genesis 1 story if the details of Genesis 2 had been inserted before the culmination of that account in God's Sabbath-day rest, and the story would not flow naturally into Genesis 3; and so on literary grounds alone it is preferable to have two accounts, with the second leading into further stories of the beginnings of humanity.

While the two stories are compatible with one another, each says something unique and important about the creation of human beings, human nature, and the relationship between God and humans. Genesis 1 speaks of our being created in the "image and likeness" of God, Genesis 2 of our being formed from the dust of the Earth and made into truly human creatures by God breathing his "breath" (or "spirit") into them. Each of these expressions is intriguing, even a bit cryptic, but paints a high and noble picture of human nature, and suggests a very close and intimate relationship with our Creator. Both stories stress the fact that humans were created "male and female" and mention the special place that humans occupy

in the earthly part of creation, themes that are expanded upon in the Genesis 2 version.

## **Image and Likeness**

In the Genesis 1 narrative, humans, like the rest of creation, are created by God and proclaimed good. Indeed, it is only after the creation of human beings that the whole of creation is described as “*very good*”. But the narrative also says something more about humans that is not said about other created things: we are created in the “image and likeness” of God. Neither Genesis, nor any other part of the Bible, says exactly what we are to make of this pronouncement, though surely it is something very good.

There are, indeed, some Christians who take it in the literal sense – which is to say, the visual sense – of the word ‘image’. Coptic (Egyptian) Christians, for example, believe that God has a body resembling a human body, and that humans resemble God quite literally in their visual appearance. By this they do not simply mean that *Jesus* – God the Son – took on a real human body when he was born of Mary in Bethlehem (which all Christians believe). Rather, they believe that God the Father has a body that looks more or less like a human body. Most Christians, however, believe that God the Father has no physical form at all, and indeed that God the Son has a body only insofar as he freely took a human nature upon Himself in the Incarnation. (“Incarnation” literally means “embodiment” – taking on a

fleshly body (*carne*), which Christians believe God did in becoming the man Jesus.) They are thus forced to find another way of interpreting this passage. One influential interpretation is that humans resemble God in *soul* rather than in *body* – that we share with God such traits as the capacities for reason, knowledge, love, and free choice, which humans have usually thought distinguish us from the other animals.

Some Christians additionally take the phrase “image and likeness” to express *two different* things, the *image* of God, and the *likeness* of God. This is the prevailing view, for example, in Eastern Orthodox theology. One might think of the distinction this way: Consider a photograph of a person. It is an *image* of that person. But a photograph of me is not really very much *like* me. It is flat and two-dimensional, whereas I am three-dimensional. I can talk and move, it cannot. I have a personality and it does not. Indeed, in all of the really important ways, *you* are much more *like* me than my picture is like me. Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that humans were created in both the image of God (a kind of pale imitation) and the likeness of God (like God in more fundamental ways), but that the likeness was lost in what Christians refer to as “the fall”. On this view, Adam and Eve were, at one time, “Godlike” in ways you and I are not Godlike. After the fall, humans are still made in the *image* of God, though we are no longer *like* God. Part of what God has in store for us is the restoration of both the full image and the likeness of God in us. (This idea will be discussed in Chapter [7].)

This interpretation of the phrase “image and likeness” – that the two words represent two different relations between God and humans – is permitted but not

compelled by the text. The Hebrew language often employs repetition of related words to emphasize a point. For example, in Psalm 8:4, David exclaims, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (King James translation) Here the expressions “man” and “son of man” are most likely two different ways of talking about the same thing: namely, human beings. The poetic repetition is not used to make a distinction, but to repeat the same theme. The expression “image and likeness” may simply be an example of this sort of linguistic device. A third interpretation, favored by Roman Catholics, is that “likeness” expresses the perfection of “image”: all human beings bear the image of God, but only a perfect human being bears the likeness of God.

However we interpret the words “image and likeness”, the Genesis 1 account of humanity clearly indicates is that there is something very special about human beings. We were created with a particular nobility, in being not only good *creations* of God, but creatures made in the Divine image and likeness, even if exactly what that means is not spelled out explicitly.

## **Dust and Spirit**

In the Genesis 2 account, “the man” is molded from the clay (or earth, or dust), and God breathes God’s breath (or spirit) into this being so that it becomes “a living soul”. In the Hebrew, there is a word play on the terms used for “man” (*ha adam* – which becomes the name of the character Adam in Genesis 2 and 3) and for

clay, earth, or dust (*adhamah*). God made *adham* from the *adhamah*. If we wanted to preserve the pun in English, we might render the passage “God created humans from the humus” and translate the name ‘Adam’ as “Human”. Or, alternatively and taking greater liberties, we might render the story by saying “God created a creature from the dust, and named him Dusty.”

Genesis 2 seems to suggest a duality to human nature. On the one hand, we are made of “dust” – out of garden-variety lifeless matter. On the other hand, God has breathed God’s own breath or spirit into us. The Hebrew word here, *neshamah*, has a root meaning of “breath”. But in Hebrew, as in many other languages, the words for breath also take on other figurative meanings, such as *life* or *living being* (as breathing distinguishes living animals from dead ones) or the various notions that are expressed in English by the words ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’. In fact, our word ‘spirit’ similarly comes from a Latin word for breath or wind, as still reflected in the word *respiration*, and the Greek *pneuma* has a similar ambiguity. It is generally translated “spirit”, but we still see the other meaning in words like ‘*pneumonia*’, which is the name for a disease that affects breathing.

It is of course impossible to know just what the original writer had in mind – perhaps it was merely a poetic way of saying that God made the man into a living, breathing being. But both Jewish and Christian commentators have tended to see something more: that the passage is saying that God imparted something of himself to the man that he did not bestow upon other living beings. Other Hebrew words for breath (*ruach*) and life (*nephesh*) are used in the Bible for both humans and animals, but *neshamah* is used only of humans and God. Within Jewish thinking, the



*neshamah* is often regarded as a higher part of the soul, absent from other creatures, which comes from God and returns to God, and which is understood as that which gives human beings awareness of God. Some Christian writers have interpreted the passage as suggesting that God breathed something of his own spirit, which Christians call the Holy Spirit, into human beings after molding a human body out of inert matter, seeing an echo of it in John 20:22, where the resurrected Jesus breathes upon his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” I should make it clear that this is a theologically controversial view, though it is widely held among Eastern Orthodox Christians and was clearly held by some of the Church Fathers (such as Basil the Great in the second century and Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth). The Nicene Creed, a statement of faith shared by many Christians, also speaks of the Holy Spirit as “the giver of life”. But Christians disagree on whether the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples *restored* the original nature God had given to Adam or whether it was a *new* thing that *went beyond* the original nature of human beings. Either way, however, I think Christians should assume that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was something God had always *intended* to bring about *some* day, and hence that human beings were created so as to be able to receive the Holy Spirit.

Together, these passages suggest a fascinating picture of human nature. On the one hand, we are creatures of earth – material beings answering to the laws of nature. As Christians are reminded on the holy day called Ash Wednesday, we are made of dust, and to dust we all eventually return when we die and our bodies decompose. On the other hand, these material organisms are also capable of being vessels for God’s Spirit. We are like clay vessels – made of earth, but fashioned to

hold something divinely precious within us. (2 Cor 4:7) If this account is correct, the original and intended nature of human beings is one of intimate union with God, of being *filled* with God's spirit. Whereas Genesis 1 suggests a stark separation between God and things created by God, Genesis 2 suggests that, while human beings are indeed formed of inert matter created by God, we are also vessels in which God's own Spirit yearns to dwell.

It is tempting to see these two sets of metaphors – image and likeness, dust and spirit – as complementary. In what ways were human beings created to be like God? One possibility is that we are like God to the extent that God's Spirit dwells within us, ennobling our nature beyond its merely earthly composition. Perhaps, in order for this to be possible at all, even our earthly nature had to be formed in special ways. Christians believe that God is everywhere, but the claim that God's Spirit can reside in us is a claim made *uniquely* about humans. Of course, there is no reason to assume that there are not other created beings elsewhere in the universe with whom God did something comparable – the universe is vast, and the Genesis story says nothing about the particulars of what happened on other worlds. But it seems likely that we are meant to conclude that God's Spirit is not also to be found in the same ways in rocks or trees or even dogs and apes, even though they are all good creations, created out of divine love and of value in their own right, and even though God is present at every point in time and space.

But even if this is incorrect, and God's Spirit dwells in the same way in other creatures as well, that is tangential to the likely point of the passage, which is not what it does not say (and perhaps implicitly denies) about other creatures, but in

what it *does* say about *us*. We are creatures (which is to say, things that were *created*, which is the original meaning of ‘creature’) and creatures made from the stuff of this world, but we are not *merely* beings *of* this world – or at least are not *meant* to be. Our bodies are formed from mere matter, and marvelously made, but that is not the end of the story: God intended his own Spirit to reside within us.

### Differences in Theme

So there are ways in which the two stories make better sense together. But there is also a way in which the contrast between themes of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 and 3 is breathtaking. In Genesis 1, the God of the Bible is presented in far grander terms than the gods we find in other ancient religions. They may be immortal (even if some of them die) and have awesome powers, controlling forces of nature. But the God of Genesis called nature itself into being simply by speaking. God is not merely an awesome power *within* the world. God created the world and everything within it from nothing. The universe is so vast that our minds boggle trying to think of its size or the number of stars within it. The one who created it must be far greater still, to have not only conceived it but brought it into being. Genesis 1 leaves us in awe of the God it depicts. And if it is clear that he is a wise and loving God, and one that in some fashion made us in his image, we nonetheless cannot help but feel the gulf between God and his creation – that the fundamental distinction is between God and *everything else*, including us – and that we are, by comparison, almost

infinitely small. Indeed, if you add to this a modern understanding of the vastness of creation, this sense can only increase. The largest of human artifices can barely be seen from orbit around the Earth, which is tiny compared with our own sun, which is one of millions of stars in one of billions of galaxies. If we reflect on this, we might very well echo the words of Psalm 8, “What is man that Thou art mindful of him?” From this perspective, we might even be tempted to see the appointment of humans to “have dominion” over the Earth as a kind of delegation of responsibility borne of necessity: that a universe so vast *needs* appointed agents watching over things “locally”, because it is too big for “central governance”.

This, however, is not the picture we actually find in the rest of the Bible, or indeed in the story of Eden that begins in Genesis 2. God is presented as taking a “hands on” interest in *particular* human beings, as conversing with them, even as “walking” in the garden in Genesis 3. There is a consistent theme in the Bible that God not only takes interest in what human beings do, but wishes to be *in relationship* with us. This is again a picture of a God whose nature is to love, but it is also one that cannot help but provoke its own sense of awe and wonder. How can we have any sort of relationship with a being so *vast* as to have created the entire universe by speaking a word? Consider this analogy: Some people in ancient times, including some Christian theologians, thought that the stars were intelligent beings. If that were true, could we communicate or have any kind of relationship to them? It seems hard to imagine, because of the incredible differences of scale. Something so vast and far away, which exists for billions of years and has a body so different from our own, must think very different kinds of thoughts if it can think at all. God

is as much vaster than the stars as the stars are larger than human beings, greater than the universe itself. Some of the ancient philosophers had an appreciation of this, and concluded that whatever God or gods there might be could have little interest in us. But this is *not* the way God is depicted in the Bible. It is true that God is reported as saying “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” (Isaiah 55:8-9) And yet God is depicted as conversing with Adam and Eve, and with many people after them, and in the fullness of time as taking on a human nature and living among us as Jesus Christ. Throughout the Bible, God is presented as desiring what Martin Buber called an “I-thou” relationship with human beings.

But there is also another kind of relationship suggested in Genesis 2 as well. If we interpret the language of God breathing his *neshamah* into Adam as placing his own spirit – what Christians call the Holy Spirit – within him, this does not suggest merely an I-thou relationship, like conversing with Adam and Eve in the garden. It suggests an *indwelling*, in which God is as intimately intertwined with us as our own breath. When we breathe, something that is not us – the air that surrounds us – enters into us, not only filling our lungs, but being absorbed into our bodies and distributed throughout every cubic inch of them. Without it, we would not be living beings at all. It also passes back out as we exhale, leaving us in ways as invisible as those through which it entered. The boundaries between what is part of us and what is “other” are blurred in breathing, much as they are in eating and drinking. If we take this analogy seriously, it suggests that there is a kind of *spiritual* life in which the “breath” or “spirit” of God plays a similar role. This idea is only hinted at in the Old Testament, but it becomes explicit in the New Testament: it is by the

indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God that we are transformed from merely natural creatures into spiritual beings whose nature is transfigured into something of the divine nature we see in Jesus. We will come back to this point in [Chapter 7], when we discuss the sanctification of human beings.

### Contrasts With Other Views

Before continuing this line of thought, it would be useful once again to pause and compare the Biblical picture of human nature and of our relationship with God with some alternative views.

For people living in my culture, the most familiar alternative view comes from a combination of atheism and the theory of evolution. In my view, there is no reason a Christian cannot believe in evolution, in the sense of believing that the *means* through which God formed our ancestors from dust into human beings had a great number of intervening steps that took billions of years to accomplish, beginning with the creation of one-celled organisms and continuing through a long process of evolution. We should not expect that such details would appear in a story of creation given to ancient peoples, even if we were to assume that the Genesis narrative was handed down by God through a kind of dictation. Whatever purpose God had in handing down such a story, it was not to educate people in *science*. What the Christian cannot believe is that the scientific story is the *whole* story. Christians

believe that the process that resulted in our existence, whatever that process might have been, was an act of God, even if it was one that took place over billions of years and was accomplished in large measure through natural processes which God had also created. Nor can Christians believe that humans are – or at least were meant to be – *merely* natural beings. It is only when evolution is combined with atheism that we arrive at such a view; and atheism, of course, is not an option for Christians.

The theory of evolution as a scientific theory actually has fairly little to say directly about human nature. Darwin proposed it as an account of how diversity and changes in species came about through a process of variation and selection. It does present a framework for accounts of how particular features (called “phenotypic traits”) of humans and other animals, like our opposable thumbs and the maternal instincts shared with other mammals and birds, might have come to be typical of our species because the ancestors that had them were better at surviving, reproducing, and raising their young than those who did not. What a *scientific* evolutionary story gives you is an account of the *origins* of a trait and what it did in the ancestral past (when ancestors who had the trait were competing with their kin who did not) that made those that had it better able to survive and reproduce.

There are, however, many *non*-scientific stories – scientific myths, if you will – built around the theory of evolution that attempt to draw conclusions about religious and humanistic topics. Some of these involve comparisons with other species, such as the view that human beings are the “highest” (and perhaps final) product of evolution. This is a scientifically naïve view, as evolutionary lineages are not at all like a “great chain of being” ranging from “lower” to “higher” forms, but

more like a tree with many branching species, and each branching involves some change that made an adaptive difference at some point in the ancient past.

Biologically, the human species is not the last step of an ascending ladder, but one of millions of branches on a tree of species in which various branches are ever dividing into new twigs or being pruned by selection. Indeed, if you evaluated the quality of species in terms of how successful they have been in a range of ecological environments, it would hard to avoid the conclusion that things like bacteria and cockroaches should take the honors. By evolutionary standards, human beings are quite the late-comer, and the jury is still out on how well we will fare on the very long time-scale of natural history. And even if you think that being a smart species with big brains gives us bragging rights over the other species, it is not an honor we can take any credit for, as we are merely the fortunate beneficiaries.

Another myth built around the theory of evolution is that the factors that drive speciation – survival and reproduction – are somehow our “real values” or the only things that really motivate us. On Tennyson’s picture of “nature red in tooth and claw,” the natural implication is that if we are somehow the pinnacle of evolution, it must be because we are the most successful killers and breeders. (And really, it must mean the most successful killers, as the reason for the reduction in populations in other species is not because we produce more offspring than locusts or bacteria, but because we have developed weapons such as pesticides and antibiotics.) There are serious debates about how (or indeed whether) evolution could have selected for traits like altruism. There are good arguments that instincts for cooperation and prosocial behavior can actually improve a population’s chances



of survival and expansion. But if these arguments were to fail in the long run, the conclusion should not be that there is not really any altruism, but that it is something that evolution cannot explain. The underlying assumption of this evolutionary myth is that the theory of evolution should be able to explain *everything* about us, and that anything that can't be explained in its terms must be an illusion. This is a deep misunderstanding of scientific theories, one that is tantamount to turning them into philosophies or religions. The theory of evolution no more implies that kindness is really just self-interest than the theory of mechanics implies that kindness is just mass and charge. And even if the theory of evolution does shed some light on what we may have drives to do (and in ways that mechanics does not), it can say nothing about what we *should* do.

We shouldn't take any scientific theory to be in the business of telling us *everything* about ourselves, or even about the natural world. But if we were to do so, we would be led to some rather pessimistic conclusions about things that are very important to us as human beings. Perhaps most obviously, if we assume we are *nothing but* physical organisms, it is hard to escape the conclusion that when our bodies die, that is the end of us. And if you are looking for some grand *purpose* to our existence, you are not going to get that from biology or physics. The sciences tell us about facts and regularities, but nothing about meaning or purpose. You will not find these things in a science text (or if you do, it is a science text that has strayed illicitly into other waters), and if you assume that the fact that the sciences are silent on these matters means that they are illusory, you may be needlessly led

down a path to nihilism – *needlessly* because the problem is that you are looking for purpose or meaning in the wrong places.

One thing you will not find in an atheistic view, of course, is an account of relationships between humans and God (or gods). But there have been many views of the world that do provide such accounts. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the ancient polytheistic religions presented a very different view of the relationships between gods and humans from what is found in the Bible. The Greek myths and their great epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, depict the gods as capricious and unkind towards humanity. True, there are stories of mortals who are “loved by the gods”, or by some particular god or goddess, and even made immortal. However, even this often has its sinister aspects. Zeus is always seducing, ravishing, or raping women (and even young men), which makes his wife Hera (somewhat unreasonably) hate *them*, and then Zeus has to do something like turn them into constellations in the sky to protect them. Perhaps better than what Hera would do to them, but being beloved by the Olympian gods is clearly risky business. It is doubtful that the average ancient Greek hearing such stories would have come out of it wishing to be raped by Zeus and turned into a constellation.

The Babylonian mythology is even darker. There, Marduk creates human beings so that the gods will have slaves. The Mayan and Canaanite gods demanded human sacrifice. The Norse gods are perhaps a bit more benign, and take fallen

heroes to live with them in Valhalla. Unlike Zeus, Odin is depicted as being largely interested (and not in a sexual way) in adult male warriors – it is far less clear what is supposed to happen to women and children – but this is chiefly a matter of recruiting soldiers for the gods’ final confrontation with their enemies, the giants, in the battle of Ragnarok, which they are doomed to lose in any case. They may have a certain affection for and even kindred spirit with humans – or at least with those who are warriors – but it is not clear that this is the kind of attention one would hope for from divine powers. Being recruited to be a foot soldier in what everyone knows will be a losing battle is not something I would regard as a tempting offer.

Even in these larger polytheistic religions there are also elements of an attunement to the cycles of the natural world – the changing skies, the seasons of planting and harvest, rain and drought – and to the other animals and plants within it. Living in harmony with the rest of nature is clearly an important theme of many of the world’s religions, expressed in different ways by hunter-gatherers and agrarian cultures. (This, I think, is more a difference from modern technological cultures than from Christianity *per se* – you will find a similar sensitivity to the rhythms of creation in ancient and Medieval Christian texts.) Our distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” forces would seem strange to practitioners of many of the world’s religions. The beings they believe in – a volcano god, or trees that eavesdrop on conversations, or rivers that flood their banks in anger when someone commits incest – are mountains, trees, and rivers, and hence things we would count as “natural”. But they are understood in some cultures as being intelligent agents as well. And in many cases they are not *benign* agents. Erupting

volcanoes and flooding rivers are causes of death and destruction. The world's religions are also full of tales of demons that cause diseases and calamities and spirits of ancestors who must be appeased. Of course, the world has had thousands of religions, each with its own mix of beliefs. Being a part of nature, and needing to live harmoniously with it, are frequent themes. But so also is a theme of human *vulnerability*, of living in a world with many dangers, natural and supernatural. In most of the world's religions, we are part of a world – natural, supernatural, or some intermixture between the two – that is alien to us, and not altogether kind.

One idea that occurs in many cultures is that there are other spirits – gods, demons, ghosts – that can enter into a person, speak to or through them, and even take over their bodies. The Bible also has stories of prophets to whom God speaks, but having visions and hearing voices is not something confined to the Biblical prophets. In ancient Greece, there were priestesses of Apollo who were said to speak the words of the god in a trance. And a number of religions have practices in which people go into a trance where they are believed to be possessed by a ghost or other spirit. On the surface, this may sound similar to the idea of God's Spirit dwelling in human beings, but spirit possessions are (usually) transient and involve another personality manifesting in a person's body. (Christians also believe that such things sometimes happen, but believe them to be the work of malicious demons.) During my lifetime, the idea of mediums who channel spirits has re-emerged into mainstream consciousness in the West, and there are several well-known books that claim to have been the work of such channeled spirits. I must confess that I find it hard to understand why someone would want to channel or be

possessed by a ghost or spirit. Most of us are very careful about whom we let even into our houses, much less our bodies. The idea of inviting a spirit about which one can know very little into one's soul and giving it control of one's body, even for a time, strikes me as disturbing and risky behavior. In any event, this is something very different from how Christians understand the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is never understood to *take control* of a person. Even when someone is understood to have received a prophetic message, he has free choice about whether and when to speak it. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 14:32 and the Book of Jonah.)

There are also more otherworldly views of human beings. Whereas materialists think that we are nothing but material organisms, some believe that our real nature is as divine sparks – spiritual beings that are trapped in the world of matter. In some strands of Gnosticism, this was seen as the result of an ancient cosmic catastrophe, and that our goal should be to free ourselves from this material prison. As mentioned in the previous chapter, most Gnostics took a very negative view of the body and of the material world in general. Here we can see this extended to seeing the material world as a very alien place for us, in fact a kind of prison, liberation from which was the primary goal of Gnostic teachings and practice. There are also philosophical and religious views that treat us as in some sense alien to the material world but in a more sympathetic relationship to it. In Plato's later works, it is souls that give order to otherwise chaotic matter, and in some strands of Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism, we are divine sparks entangled in a world of darkness, but also have a role in raising up and redeeming that world.

## **Dominion and Gardening**

In both of the creation narratives, humans are also given special authority over the rest of creation.

God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

The language of Genesis 1, of “subduing” the earth and “having dominion over” the other living things is unsettling. It sounds like language of conquest and subjugation, as though the earth and other living beings are things that need to be kept down and put in their place. The language of Genesis 2, however, puts this in a different perspective: God in essence appoints the man to be a gardener. Anyone who has tried her hand at gardening knows that it can be hard work, and takes skill and understanding. Left to their own devices and not staked up, tomato vines will trail on the ground, causing much of the fruit to rot and be wasted, and covering and suffocating other plants. Some plants require careful pruning to fully thrive. It is the same with many animals. Sheep that are not herded each day will overgraze an area, killing off all the vegetation. A good gardener or shepherd has to understand

something about plants and animals and what is good for them, and work to create conditions where they can all flourish.

Moreover, the human gardeners in Genesis are not *given* the garden as their possession. It is *God's* garden, and they are merely its stewards or caretakers. Presumably, *part* of what is involved in being made in the image and likeness of God consists in having some of the skills needed to help order the rest of creation so that it can flourish properly. But it is a delegated task, and presumably those to whom it is given are held accountable for how well they perform it. In such a role as appointed caretakers, moreover, the relationship between humans and the parts of creation over which we are given responsibility is of a piece with the relationship between humans and God. If I engage you to take care of my cat or my garden, you cannot fully separate how you treat *them* from how you are treating *me* in the process. If you neglect or abuse them, you are also being unfaithful in your relationship with me. Similarly, we must suppose that the appointment of Adam and Eve as gardeners in the Eden story suggests that how we treat God's creatures is not a matter entirely separate from our relationship with God. When we neglect or abuse them, we are being unfaithful in our relationship to God as well.

## **Relationships With One Another**

The creation narratives also make it clear that humans were made for relationship with one another. Genesis 2 conveys this by telling the story as though God initially just made *one* human being, and then saw that “it was not good for the man to be alone” and that companionship with non-human animals was not enough for him, and consequently made a woman from his own flesh to be his mate and to share his work. Taken literally, this might sound like the story of the first cloning. As with most of the stories early in Genesis, I tend to think that questions about whether it is meant to be an historical account only distract us from the spiritual meaning. And in this case, I take the spiritual meaning to be that we were meant to live in relationship with one another, and particularly in families, working together in the tasks God has set for us, supporting and aiding one another as well as providing what only human companionship can provide.

I do not think that this means that there are not people who are called to be single, or even to live as hermits. A number of the people that Christians have regarded as saintly have spent a great deal of time alone, and many did not marry or have families. Some people are naturally more introverted than others, and some have sacrificed some of the usual relationships with other human beings in order to cultivate a more intimate relationship with God. But it has always been a matter of disagreement among Christians how uncommon a state this is or should be. St. Paul, who wrote a great deal of the New Testament, was unmarried and recommended celibacy, but most of Jesus’ disciples were married and presumably some had



children. In some eras, there have been Christians who have viewed marriage as a lesser state, or even regarded sex as evil. But it is impossible to reconcile this negative view of sex with the creation narrative, as God's first commandment to human beings in Genesis 1:28 is to "be fruitful and multiply". This should not be taken as meaning that everyone has a responsibility to have children, but sex and procreation are clearly not regarded as intrinsically evil things in the Bible. Having children is regarded as a blessing, and indeed most of the Old Testament is the story of one extended family – the children of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob who was renamed Israel, the ancestors of the Jewish people.

### **Foreshadowing of Problems**

The ideas that have been presented here – that we are made in God's image and likeness and as vessels for God's own spirit, and that we are made for relationship with God and one another – all sound very positive. Read by themselves, the creation narratives might seem to paint a picture of human nature and of our relationship with God and creation that sounds so warm and fuzzy that it is difficult to recognize in it the world we see around us or its inhabitants. Indeed, if you start out by surveying the world around us, you might well be led to think that one of the alternative views we have touched upon in passing seems far more realistic – that we are merely intelligent beasts, or souls trapped in a hostile

material world, or that if there are gods, they either do not care much about us or else do not have our best interest in mind.

However, the discussion of the idea that God wishes to dwell in relationship both *among* and *within* us already raises a crucial question. Relationship is ultimately a two-way street. One person can seek a relationship with another, and can do a great deal for the other person that makes it clear that his intentions are genuine and loving, but it is only fully a relationship when it is mutual and reciprocated. As I write this chapter, I am taking care of the cat of a friend who is travelling. At this point, a week and a half into the catsitting, we have developed a close relationship. But it was not always clear that this would happen. I took the cat in, fed her, called and petted her. But as anyone who is familiar with cats already knows, cats have minds of their own, and choose whom they want to be close to. It is the same way with other people: no matter how much you try to be friends with someone, there is always the chance that they will be withdrawn or dislike you.

I have therefore been careful to say that God *desires* and *seeks* relationship with us, leaving open the question of whether that relationship actually *happens*, because whether it happens depends upon our response. And the picture the Bible paints here is often a sad or tragic one: God is depicted as a disappointed suitor or a husband with an unfaithful spouse. Certainly many people feel an intense desire for a relationship with God, just as they feel a desire for relationships with other human beings. Yet at the same time we are often confused about just what this would mean. We cannot see or touch God, and sometimes God feels distant or absent, and we wonder why. The Bible makes it very clear that this is not a matter of indifference

on God's part. God has a proactive love that reaches out to us. If there is a distance between us and God, if God does not dwell within us, it is ultimately because we have chosen to be aloof. (On the other hand, not *feeling* God's presence does not mean that he is not there.)

Likewise, being made for relationship with one another also means that we are *vulnerable* to one another. If a supportive family and a just society are among the things that can make a life good, an abusive family or an unjust society can make life a living hell. The description of Eden in Genesis 2 is poignant precisely because it is such a stark contrast with the world we often see around us. The idea of a world in which human beings live in loving relationship with God and one another may be a beautiful and noble story. It may even stir something deep within us. But it is unlikely to ring true as a description of our own lives or the world as we find it. It is to this topic that we turn in the next chapter.

## 4

### Fallen

The previous chapter explored what the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 say about human nature: that we are formed from the earth, but made in the image and likeness of God in a fashion that makes us suitable for God to breathe His own Spirit into us; that when God made human beings he pronounced them good; and that God appointed humans as caretakers over a portion of the rest of the universe He had created. It is a picture of human nature that recognizes both our spiritual nature and the fact that we are also physical organisms, and does so without suggesting that either part of our nature is alien or evil. It is a *beautiful* story – the sort of thing that Renaissance painters liked to depict in idyllic scenes of the garden of Eden, with Adam petting a lion that is in turn gently nuzzling a lamb.

But it does not take much reflection to realize that the world we see around us does not look much like that. In our world, we are more likely to find the lion eating the lamb, or else the lion's head hung upon a hunter's wall, the garden chopped down to make room for a strip mine or a parking lot, and the man and the

woman hungry, poor, overworked, diseased, disabled, or oppressed, and their relationship dysfunctional or troubled by domestic violence. Paintings of Eden are described as “idyllic” precisely because what they present stands in such stark contrast with the world as we know it. The vision of humanity presented in Genesis 2 is *not* a depiction of the human condition as we find it, but a vision of what human life *could* be, and perhaps *should* be, but most assuredly *is not*.

If the Bible stopped there, in Genesis 2, we might have a story that was suitable for comforting a small child we wished to shield from the evils and hardships of life for as long as we could, but it would not be an account of human existence that an adult could take seriously. At best, it would be glaringly naïve. At worst, it would be a cruel lie. Indeed, many people might find a more accurate picture of the world they know in seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s description of a world marked by “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” [Leviathan VIII.9] Hobbes wrote this as a survivor of the English Civil War, a particularly bloody affair which turned neighbors, families, and friends against one another. Those of us who have had the good fortune to live in gentler times and locales might find his characterization of what he called this “state of nature” (which for him meant the state into which human beings devolve without well-functioning governance and civil societies) a bit extreme, but one does not need to scour the news or the history books very long to discover that the world can easily become a very bad place, and *is* bad – horrifically bad – in many places at any given moment. Indeed, even if we live in circumstances where we take for granted a warm dry place to sleep, clean water,

nutritious food, and the ability to walk where we please with little fear for our safety, crimes like murder, assault, robbery, rape, extortion, domestic violence, and child molestation still occur in our communities, and some of them no doubt occur unseen in the house or the school down the road. There are many places in the world today where the atrocities of war are as bad or worse than those that haunted Hobbes's memory. And of course, beyond war and outright criminality, there is a great deal of bullying, intimidation, and systemic injustice that goes on around us all the time, not to mention the countless incidents of petty meanness we all experience in daily life, which lead some people to misery, depression, and suicide.

The writers of the Bible were by no means naïve about the evils of the world. While the opening chapters of Genesis, taken alone, might seem to present an unrealistically idyllic view of human nature, that idyll ends abruptly in Chapter 3, and the rest of the Bible includes the full panoply of human evils. The first murder is presented in Genesis 4, and in Genesis 5 begins the story of the Flood, in which the majority of the world's population is destroyed because of their wickedness. In the rest of the Old Testament, you will find examples of most of the evil things that human beings do: murder, rape, adultery, incest, lies, jealousy, tyranny, war, slavery, economic injustice and the exploitation of poor people, widows, orphans, and refugees. Indeed, even the people that we might be tempted to think of as the "heroes" of the Bible – Abraham, Moses, King David, King Solomon – are not presented as perfect. When Abraham travels to Egypt, he passes his wife off as his sister and pimps her out to Pharaoh. Moses kills a man in anger. David commits adultery with Bathsheba and then sends her husband to die on the front lines of

battle so that he might marry her. Solomon has hundreds of wives and concubines and engages in forbidden foreign religious practices. God gives the people of Israel a set of Laws to live by, but they continually break them. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the writer sums it up bleakly: “There is no one on Earth that is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.” (Eccles. 7:20)

In short, for any of the evils we have experienced or seen around us, we can probably find a story in the Bible that acknowledges them as well. And for any of the bad things we may ourselves have done, we can probably find a character in the Bible who did some variation upon it long before us. The bad things people do are nothing new: they are part of the human condition as we find it, and the Bible plainly and repeatedly acknowledges this. Indeed, it is remarkably direct and inclusive in both its depiction of human badness and its condemnation of it.

This raises two important questions. First, where is God in all this? Second, how did we get from a story of noble creatures created in God’s image and likeness to a world in which everyone does wrong?

### **Where Is God in This?**

To the first question – Where is God in all this? – there are three answers: God is angry, God is grieving, and God is continually working to call people back into right relationship with Him and with one another.

It is perhaps God's wrath that makes for the most memorable episodes in the Old Testament – the sorts of things that provide the materials for blockbuster movies like *The Ten Commandments*. God inflicts a series of plagues upon Egypt to force Pharaoh to allow the children of Israel to go forth from their slavery. God obliterates Sodom – a city so bad that rape gangs prowl the streets at night to prey upon visitors. God allows the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to be destroyed for their unfaithfulness and misdeeds. Indeed, it is clear that many people in Biblical times tended to view misfortunes as divine punishments for sins, known or unknown, private or communal.

In reading these stories, our reaction may depend upon which characters in the stories we associate with. If God does terrible things to the Egyptian slaveholders – and indeed to ordinary Egyptians who probably had no direct role in the practice of slavery – this might seem to the Egyptians (or those who take their perspective) like the terrible (and perhaps even disproportionate) vengeance of a jealous deity. But if you take the perspective of the victims of oppression, it might seem an act of justice and liberation. Indeed, generations of oppressed people, like those who endured slavery in pre-Civil War America, have looked to the story as a source of strength and hope.

Our dual reactions to such stories are also reflected in two ways we think about the notion of “justice”. When we ourselves stand under judgment, we tend to think of it as some more powerful person doing something bad to us, and to minimize what we might have done to deserve it. But justice – *real* justice – also involves *redressing a wrong*, ideally in a way that puts and end to an *unjust* situation



and restores something to its victims. If someone commits an offense and nothing is done about it, the wrong is not confined to the original act, but is an ongoing open wound for both the victims and the wider community. This is why victims of rape, assault, and defamation are willing to spend years of their lives seeking justice, and likewise the families of murder victims. When you are the offender, a God who is angry at injustice may seem a terrifying figure. When you are the victim – especially a victim without earthly recourse – it is a source of hope and comfort.

The terrible truth, however, is that we are all, at some time or other, both transgressor and victim. The belief that God hates injustice can be a hope and a comfort when we suffer injustice, but it is a sobering and terrifying thought when we are the ones who have committed it.

But God's concern with justice is only one side of the picture we find in the Bible. A second, and perhaps more surprising, theme we find is that God *grieves* over the wrongs of the world. One striking example of this is found in the Old Testament Book of Hosea, where God is presented in the role of a loving husband who has watched his wife be unfaithful to him. In that book, we read,

When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord." (Hosea 2:2)

Hosea was a prophet – someone God spoke *to* and spoke *through* to others. In his case, God did so in a remarkable way, leading Hosea into a faithless marriage that gave the prophet a sense of how God feels about the human condition. The "wife" in the metaphor is, on a narrow interpretation, the nation of Israel with whom God had made a covenant, but the image could be applied to every human being who has

fallen out of the kind of right relationship with God and with others that we see depicted in Genesis 2. The brief book is a moving account of the sorrows and hardships of such alienation for everyone involved. But in the end, the message is one of reconciliation:

The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."  
(Hosea 3:1)

And this brings us to the third and most important theme: that of reconciliation and restoration of right relationship. Indeed, if there is a single overarching theme to the Bible, it is that, as often as people fall out of right relationship with God and one another, God is always working to restore those relationships, to forgive and to renew. The Law given to Moses, which instructed the people of Israel in how to live rightly, also contained instructions for what to do in order to repent of any sins a person had committed and to be reconciled with God and other people. God spoke to the prophets so that they could speak to others, calling them to repent their sins, change their ways, and be reconciled to God. And Christians believe that God's reconciling love was brought to full fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to which we shall return in Chapter [6]. Towards its end, the aforementioned Book of Hosea reports God as saying "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."  
(Hosea 6:6) And the author of Lamentations writes

For no one is cast off  
by the Lord forever.

Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,

so great is his unfailing love.

For he does not willingly bring affliction  
or grief to anyone. (Lamentations 3:31-33)

The depiction of God in the rest of the Bible amplifies and expands upon the vision of a loving Creator presented in the creation narratives. God did not simply create a world and then stand back and watch. The God of the Bible is actively involved in and concerned about what happens in the world, lamenting its misfortunes, hating injustice, yet also desiring not to punish but to restore humanity and all of creation to proper relationship with Him.

## **From Eden to the World We Know**

But this brings us to the second important question: how to relate the story told about the creation of human beings with what we actually see in ourselves and our societies, not only today but throughout human history. If you were to try to put together a hypothesis about human nature purely on the basis of observation, you probably would not arrive at the idea that we were created in the image and likeness of God in a fashion that a wise and benevolent creator could pronounce to be good, or that we are suitable vessels for God's Spirit. Indeed, based solely on what we see looking around us, some of the other ideas people have come up with about human nature might seem far closer to the mark: that we are very intelligent animals driven by our instincts and appetites, that our nature is in no small measure

morally evil, or perhaps that humanity is a curious mixture of “children of light” and “children of darkness”, with the latter too often occupying the seats of power.

If the creation narratives tell us something true about ourselves, it is something that might not be readily apparent *without* such a story to remind or inform us of it. Indeed, for many of us, it might even be a truth that we could come to know only if it were *revealed* to us with divine authority. Perhaps we have some dim sense that somehow, at our core, we are nobler beings than our behavior or the world we have made for ourselves would suggest, that we in some sense can and should be something more than we actually are, that we are intrinsically worthy of love in spite of our faults. This is a noble intuition that has formed the core of a number of human philosophies and religions. Some of them have even taken the view that this intuition is something like a *memory* of something better that is easily obscured or forgotten, be it a golden age of history in the ancient past or a different form of existence as celestial spirits before being born into earthly bodies. They have their own explanations of the troubled world we see around us: that suffering is an illusion, that humanity has been on a continual downward trajectory from its golden age, or that our woes are a consequence of being entangled in a material world and losing sight of our true nature.

Christianity has its own distinctive view of the discord between the noble vision presented in the creation narratives and the condition in which we find ourselves and the world around us. They are discordant because there is a real difference between them. The human condition as we find it is not in fact what seems to be described in Genesis 1 and 2. This is not because what is presented

there is false, but because human nature as we find it has been corrupted and distorted from its original and intended form. We and the people around us are not the kinds of creatures God intended us to be. In Christian terminology, our present nature is *fallen* from its original and intended state. But if it is fallen, it can also be raised up again and restored.

## **The Story of the Fall**

In-between the creation narratives and the much longer sections of the Bible dealing with an already-fallen world, we find Genesis 3, which is sometimes referred to as “the story of the fall”. While some version of this story will already be known to many readers, it is worth rereading in its entirety:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,<sup>\*</sup> knowing good and evil.’ So 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; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have

done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’ To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ And to the man\* he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it”, cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man\* and for his wife, and clothed them.

Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’ — therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:1-24)

First, note that this is presented in the form of a *story*, not a theory. Anyone who reads the Bible looking for the presentation of theories is likely to come away disappointed. Of course, we often read narrative stories and try to turn them into theories, and there is nothing wrong with that. But when we share these with one another, or read works of theology and Biblical interpretation, we often find that other people have drawn very different inferences from the same stories. So there is something to be said for starting with the story itself, looking at what is contained within it, and also considering *what kind* of story it is supposed to be.

The story reads as a continuation of the second creation narrative in Genesis

2. It has the same cast of characters – God, Adam (a name that, as you may recall, can also mean “the man” or “the being formed from the earth”), and his wife Eve –

plus a new character, identified as “the serpent”. Adam and Eve are residing in a place identified as “the garden”, in which there are plants and animals of familiar sorts, in addition to two unique trees identified as “the tree of life” and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” With respect to the latter, they have been warned by God not to eat of its fruit, advice they have apparently taken quite naturally and unquestioningly until the serpent persuades or beguiles Eve to try it. After some discussion and thinking, she does so, and then gets her husband to eat of it as well. Immediately, something changes in their state of mind: they become ashamed of their nakedness and hide from God when he comes to the garden to converse with them. They admit their disobedience only under direct questioning, the man trying to shift blame to the woman and the woman to the serpent. God expels them from the garden into the much harsher world we know and tells them a bit about how they can expect their lives to be different thereafter: they will have to toil for the necessities of life, men will oppress women, childbirth will be painful and dangerous, and they will eventually suffer bodily death.

In the story we in fact see two transformations. The most obvious comes at the end – the expulsion from Eden into a harsher world. But even before this, a striking psychological and spiritual change has already occurred. After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve’s relationships with God and one another have changed dramatically. The fact that God is found “walking in the garden” and conversing with Adam and Eve is not presented as anything remarkable. However unusual it might seem to *us*, the story suggests that this had been a normal and expected occurrence in the garden. What *is* presented as unusual is the fact that they are

hiding from him. While almost nothing about their lives before this point is described in the story, the implication is that being in God's presence and conversing with him were previously things they had engaged in freely and naturally. A sense of shame that was no part of their original state now leads them to seek to avoid the presence of God. Moreover, the man tries to blame the woman, and the woman in turn blames the serpent. In attempting to avoid the implications of the ruptured relationship with God, their relationship with one another is ruptured as well. Indeed, they have even become alienated from themselves. They had always been naked, but had never regarded it as something to be ashamed of. (They had, after all, been created and pronounced good in that condition.) Now they are alienated from their own bodies and regard them as shameful and in need of covering. And they are alienated from their own deeds as well, admitting to them only when directly questioned and even then attempting to shift responsibility to someone else.

(Interestingly, we are not told what *would* have happened had they come forward on their own initiative and confessed their actions. Given the Bible's presentation of God as eager to forgive and be reconciled, it might well be that the expulsion from the garden was not the inevitable outcome of disobedience or whatever undisclosed changes the eating of the fruit itself might have brought about. It might be more a consequence of intentionally seeking to remove themselves from the presence of God and to first hide and then deny responsibility for their actions.)



## Interpreting the Story

How should we interpret this story? I wish to begin with two extreme possibilities, one minimalist and the other literalist. The most minimal interpretation is that the function of the story is simply to give voice to our sense of moral distance between the human condition as we find it and a dimly-understood sense of what we ideally could or should be. In an ideal situation, we would never die, all that we need would be within our reach, we would live in harmony with God, with one another, and with the rest of the created world, and we would have no occasion for shame or discord. In the world as we find it, we do not experience the presence of God, we do wrong things, we are victims and perpetrators of duplicity, we feel shame at our actions that leads us to try to hide them and shift blame to others, our existence is fraught with pain and danger and sustained only through hard toil, and eventually we all die. The story helps illustrate for us what an ideal form of human existence might look like, though only vaguely and largely by contrast with the more familiar world we hear described at the end of the story.

This minimalist interpretation has something right about it so far as it goes – clearly there *is* a juxtaposition of the woes of the human condition with something better. But this leaves out important aspects of the story. The story does not merely suggest that there is another possible form of human existence that is more the sort of life we could and should be living. It ties the difference between the two forms of existence to features of our relationships to God, to one another, and to the rest of the created world. Moreover, the setting of the story in the remote ancestral past

and the divine expulsion of humanity from the garden suggest that the basic features of our current condition are beyond our power to undo. *You and I* do not begin our lives in the garden. We are born into a humanity already expelled from it. Indeed, to us, it is the life depicted in the garden that seems strange and alien. From our vantage, we can only dimly imagine what it might be like to live that other sort of life, lived in the presence of God and free from want, need, guilt, fear, deception, and strife. The story may help us see that there is – or once was, or at least could be – another possible form of life for human beings. But the conclusion of the story, with the closing of the gates to Eden, simply underscores the failure of all our attempts to recreate an ideal world.

The literalist interpretation is that this is a story about an actual historical event that occurred on some particular day in the remote past and forever changed the situation of all subsequent generations. The characters in the story named Adam and Eve were two real historical individuals. There was a real place, the garden, now inaccessible to us, where they lived, and in it grew two trees of a sort not found in the world we know. They were commanded not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they did so after a real conversation Eve had, either with a peculiarly intelligent talking reptile or Satan in the form of a serpent. Perhaps the talk of God “walking” in the garden is a metaphor, but in some form God had a very particular conversation with Adam and Eve after they had eaten the fruit, expelled them from the garden into a very different sort of environment, and closed off the way back.

Many Christians have assumed that the story of the fall should be interpreted in this literal fashion – as a story recounting events in the lives of two historical individuals who lived long ago. And perhaps it *is* a true historical narrative about something that happened with particular people on a particular day in ancient history. But it would, I think, be a mistake to assume that it *must* be interpreted in this fashion or that the only alternative is to view it as some kind of *lie*. After all, Jesus often taught in parables: “A sower went out to sow seed....”, “There was a father who had two sons....”, “A man planted a fig tree....” In all likelihood, these parables were neither true accounts of particular real people’s actions *nor false* accounts of them, because they were not intended to be reports of historical events at all. Someone who interrupted to ask “What was his name?” or “What color were his eyes?” or “What day of the week was it?” would be missing the point. But Jesus’ parables are not simply fictitious stories either. They are stories cast in narrative form, but in order to convey a spiritual lesson. If someone thinks that, if Jesus’ parables are not *also* accurate accounts of episodes in someone’s biography, that makes Jesus some kind of liar, that person does not have an adequate grasp of the range of kinds of stories we tell for different purposes. With some kinds of stories, it matters whether they accurately report the words and deeds of real people, with others it does not. Parables fall into the latter category. With stories such as parables, their whole point is in their spiritual meaning. Someone who read, say, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and set off to gather archaeological and textual evidence about “the real historical prodigal son” would probably be off on a wild goose chase and, worse, would miss the spiritual lesson. Indeed, even if the

parable *was* based on a real case, that would not matter. You wouldn't understand the spiritual meaning of the parable more deeply by finding out more about the family. In fact, doing so would just be a distraction from the spiritual message.

But it is also possible to go too far in the opposite direction. Sometimes it really is important that a story, even a story with deep spiritual meaning, is also an historical story, and that it is an accurate one. Indeed, in some cases, how we interpret the spiritual meaning of the story is inseparable from the historicity of the story. To take the most important example, early Christians made it quite clear that their story of Jesus dying and then rising from the dead was *not* supposed to be some kind of merely symbolic story, but a remarkable event that some among them had actually witnessed. Indeed, they seemed quite clear that, if Jesus did *not* really rise from the dead, their whole faith was in vain. (1 Corinthians 12:15-19)

So, with any story in the Bible, there are questions to be asked about what Saint Augustine called its “spiritual meaning” and its “literal meaning” – both what each of these is for any particular story, and whether it is the sort of story in which the literal meaning should be presumed to be operative. The story of the fall is an interesting case, because there are some elements of it seem to have spiritual meaning that is independent of whether it is supposed to be an historical story about two real people, but there are also additional things about it where it seems to make a difference whether it is also read literally. Most prominently, if it is read literally, it is hard to escape the conclusion that these two people were largely to blame, not only for the woes of subsequent generations, but also, more puzzlingly, for *our* separation from God – *yours* and *mine* – and this tempts us into the very kind

of blame-shifting that seems so problematic in the story itself. It also threatens to distract us into endless and probably insoluble questions both of a scholarly nature (e.g., how might we map this event onto what we think we know about human prehistory?) and of a sort that could be best treated through fantasy or science fiction (e.g., did the fruit somehow induce some kind of dramatic biological and psychological change that could be inherited by later generations?) I regard it as an open question whether this particular story is supposed to be an historical story, and not one that uses a narrative form *solely* to communicate a spiritual truth, and wise and thoughtful Christians have come down on both sides of this question. But, regardless of whether it should also be taken literally, it is clearly a story intended to convey a spiritual message, and it is upon this that I shall focus my attention. For, while I think assumptions about its historicity may indeed have implications for fine points of theology, I do not think they matter for our understanding of the spiritual meaning that is relevant to a core understanding the Christian Good News.

## **Human Nature as We Find It**

One way of approaching this meaning is to ask what answer Christians should give to the question, “Is human nature essentially good or essentially evil?” (Or, perhaps a third possibility that would be popular today, that it is neither good nor evil, but simply that of an intelligent animal.) I think the proper Christian response is, “It’s not as simple as that.” Our nature as we find it in ourselves and

others around us involves a mixture of the good, the evil, and the purely natural. We have inclinations to love and benevolence. We also have inclinations to hatred and cruelty. And we have motivations like hunger and sexual desire, which are themselves neither morally good nor evil, but can lead us to *do* good or evil things. But our nature as we find it today is not all there is to our nature: it is a form of human nature that is fallen, twisted, and distorted from what it was meant to be. (And from what, if we take the story literally, it indeed once was in our first ancestors before the fall.) The evil we find in ourselves and others is a symptom of this fallen condition. Indeed, properly understood, evil is the sick, twisted, distorted manifestation of something that is, in its healthy and undistorted form, good. Moral sickness – sickness of soul – can be properly understood only by reference to its opposite, moral or spiritual health. Likewise, moral or spiritual distortion can be properly be understood only by reference to its opposite, moral or spiritual rectitude.

Here we find an idea that might at first seem foreign to us, but which was at the core of the classical and medieval understandings of human nature and indeed of nature in general: namely, that the nature of some kind of thing – a human being, an animal, a plant, a family, a society – has to be understood by reference to its fullest and best expression. Many of the people, animals, and plants we actually encounter are plainly sickly, stunted, or deformed. Many families are dysfunctional, and many societies unjust. Indeed, perhaps *all* of the examples we actually encounter suffer in one or another of these regards to one extent or other. Yet it would make literally no sense to think of the *nature* of a person (or of an animal,

plant, family, or society) solely in terms of illness, deformity, or dysfunction, because the very notions of illness, deformity, and dysfunction are understood only by comparison to standards of health, proper form, and proper function. It need not be that all healthy and thriving organisms, families, or societies would be exactly alike; but without such positive notions we would lack an understanding both of the ways individual instances depart from the ideal and of notions such as human persons, animals, plants, families, or societies themselves. It is true that the ideal standards of what a fully thriving human being, organism, or society would look like are particularly difficult to envision or articulate. (Even in medicine, we have much more concrete understandings of particular types of disease, deformity, and dysfunction than of health, and in politics we understand particular types of injustice far better than what an ideally just society would look like.) But to understand a particular form of existence as wrong or deficient, we must compare it with something better, however dimly we might understand it.

In philosophical terminology, the idea I am describing is the idea that human nature (and also animal nature, the nature of societies, etc.) is *teleological*, meaning that it is understood in terms of an ideal goal or end (*telos* in Greek). In Western philosophy, this idea is found in the works of the two greatest philosophers of ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle. For Aristotle, the notion was deeply *biological*: the *telos* of an organism is the end state to which it strives in growth and development. The *telos* of an acorn is to become a (healthy, thriving) oak, that of a human infant is to become a rational and virtuous adult human being. The same idea is found in non-Western philosophies. For example, the Chinese Confucian

philosopher Mencius suggested that we are each born with a “seed” or “sprout” of benevolence, but (like a botanical seed) this must be properly cultivated to develop into its full form, and human beings are not fully developed human beings unless they do so.

Jesus used similar horticultural metaphors: the seeds of the Kingdom of God can find good soil and grow and bear abundant fruit, or they can fall on rocky soil and lack nourishment, or upon shallow soil and begin to grow and then falter, or be choked by weeds. (Matthew 13) Jesus’ metaphor is importantly different from that of Mencius, however, in that the “seeds” in question are not simply something that is part of the native endowment of the human person, but something bestowed by God. For both Aristotle and Confucius, all that needed to be considered were the individual and her relationship to the society in which she lived. (Both believed that the conditions of one’s family and society could have a profound influence on the possibilities for cultivating oneself to one’s full flower.) For Christians, once again, what is needed in order for us to become the kinds of creatures we are capable of becoming is the right sort of relationship with God, because it is God who is the one who bestows the seeds of the Kingdom. And here we return to the basic theme of the fall: that the proper relationship between humans and God has been ruptured. To become the kinds of creatures we are meant to be, we must receive the seeds that only God can provide. But, like Adam and Eve in the story, we turn away from God and seek other types of fruit that suit our own fancy instead – things that delight our senses, satisfy our appetites, or which we think will make us wise and God-like.



Note that these are the thoughts that lead Eve to try the forbidden fruit in the story.

So 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.

Eve does not set out to reject or disobey God. She is beguiled into thinking of the fruit in ways that in themselves seem good. There is nothing wrong with the enjoyment of beauty, or with the savor of food, or indeed with satisfying one's hunger. (We must presume that the garden was beautiful, that the other things that were given to them for food were tasty, and that they had need of sustenance.) And the desires to be wise and to be more like God are in themselves noble motives. The problem, rather, was that she substituted her own thinking about how to attain good things in place of a trust in God's guidance and providence. After the serpent's prompting, she saw that the fruit was beautiful, imagined that it would be good to eat, took the serpent's word that it would make her like God, and ignored the fact that God had commanded her not to eat of it. Most immediately, this was a temptation to elevate her own insight and will over her trusting relationship with God. Had she thought about in different terms, she might have realized that, if God had forbidden her to eat of the fruit, it must have been for good reason, that she had other beautiful and tasty things at her disposal, and that God would provide all that was needed, in due time, if he wished her to become more like him.

Some of the harm we do to ourselves and to others comes about in a fashion similar to the way Eve came to eat the fruit: through motivations that are themselves innocent and even beneficial, but short-sighted or misdirected. Eve does

not know what the result of eating the fruit will be, and the serpent describes the results in a way that is misleading if not outright false. (She does indeed come to know good and evil as a result of eating it, but only by experiencing the effects of evil she has done, and so her knowledge of good and evil is quite unlike God's knowledge of it.) But if the desires for beauty, good food, and becoming more like God are themselves innocent and even good, Eve's *action* is not fully innocent, because she presumably also understands that she should trust God over the serpent and indeed over her own judgment. She might well have lost sight of this in the moment of temptation – indeed the serpent's whole strategy in tempting her seems to be to direct her attention towards her desires and their objects and away from her relationship with God – but it was not something of which she was wholly ignorant. (Without the divine warning not to eat of that particular fruit, it would be a very different story.) Even from a purely human standpoint, we have all done things on the basis of a desire that held our attention at the moment when we might, with a bit of reflection, have seen that it was not a good idea. Sometimes the consequences are small – someone has dessert with lunch and is sluggish the rest of the day. Sometimes they are dire – someone drinks and drives and there is a tragic crash. But even when things turn out alright, the things we *could have* reflected on but *failed to* are morally significant, and the deeds themselves cannot be undone.

## Fallen Human Nature

But the story of events leading up to the fall is also special in ways that are supposed to be unlike our own condition, because it is about the temptation of a human being whose nature is not yet fallen. The first effects we see of fallen nature in the story are to try to share one's sin by getting someone else to do it as well, a desire to hide oneself and one's actions from the presence of God, and a desire to blame others for one's actions. Unlike the desire to eat a tasty-looking piece of fruit, these desires are themselves corrupt. If they are all too familiar to us – indeed, perhaps so much so that they strike us as “natural” in the sense that it is how we expect human psychology to operate – this only shows that the story has gotten something deeply right about human nature as we find it. And we do not have to wait very long before we find more twisted desires as the narrative continues. In Genesis 4, one of Adam and Eve's children, Cain, murders his brother Abel out of jealousy and spite. I hope that the reader has never had occasion to feel the desire to do mortal harm to another person; but under the wrong conditions, such emotions can come, powerfully and unbidden, even to those we might consider good and gentle people. I recall a time, many years ago, when a good friend discovered the torments of jealousy after the woman he was dating rejected him for another. Suddenly, all of the things that had seemed like incomprehensible madness in a play like *Othello* were going on inside of his own heart. Being a decent and self-observant person, he viewed them as temptations and fought against them, but the experience was harrowing nonetheless. And we have all known, encountered, or at

least read about, people who do not take a stand against their own negative emotions, people for whom jealousy, greed, hatred, and thoughts of harm against others are not so much temptations they fight against but are instead the defining features of their characters. This may well be what most of us mean when we speak of “bad people”: people who harm, torment, or cheat others and either take positive enjoyment in so doing or at least do not care about the effects their actions have upon those around them.

But we should be careful lest we suppose that this type of badness is something reserved for a special class of villains or criminals and not something that could never happen to people like you and me. If you have been spared the throes of bitterness or a thirst for vengeance, that may be in large measure because your fondest hopes have never been dashed or someone you love taken before their time. If theft, fraud, or the accumulation of wealth at the expense of others seem foreign to you, the reason may be in part that you have never felt your material security at risk. It is only when we are put sorely to the test that the true temper of our character is revealed, and when that happens, even if goodness prevails, it does so against ugly desires arising from within us. And, as I shall make a case in the next chapter, for each of us, if we are truly honest and reflective, there is some corner of our lives that is distorted in ways that are abhorrent to us, and which we cannot remedy, even through our greatest efforts.

It is this, I think, that is the crucial take-home message of the story of the fall: that human nature as we find it – the kind of person that you and I are at the core of our being – is not as God intended it to be. And in this there is a kind of paradox.

Christians must still believe that we were created in God's image and likeness, made of the dust of the earth but as vessels for God's Spirit, and that suggests a very noble picture of human nature and a life lived in intimate communion with God. Yet this is not what we see in ourselves or in the world around us, and the wretchedness of human life is amply acknowledged in the Bible. Some of our woes are due to non-human causes – droughts, plagues, hurricanes – but the worst parts of human wretchedness are those we inflict upon ourselves and one another. And while of course some people are better or worse than others, it is not that there is a division between one group of completely good "children of light" and another of wholly evil "children of darkness". Rather, we share in a common stock of shortcomings, faults, and temptations, even if we differ with respect to which particular ones each of us is most susceptible to and how much we have resisted or given in to them.

In one way, this is just the minimal, commonsense observation explored earlier in the chapter: that there is a distance between human nature as we find it and an ideal standard, at least dimly accessible to us all, by which we measure our faults. Indeed, without such a comparison between an imperfect reality and an ideal standard, the very idea of moral evaluation makes no sense. What the Christian view adds to this, however, is crucial. First, and most importantly, the "ideal standard" is not some mere philosophical abstraction, but something that God really intended for us. (If one reads Genesis 3 literally, perhaps two of our ancestors really enjoyed this status for a time, though whether they did so ultimately makes little difference to your situation or mine.) As a consequence, what we see in our nature as we find it is not the *whole story* about you or me. Psychologists and philosophers

have said many insightful things about human nature over the centuries based on observation, and much of this can be quite instructive; but it is also incomplete, because the human beings we can observe are all *fallen* human beings. Trying to understand human nature by observing the people around us is like trying to understand human health on the basis of observations in emergency rooms or hospice wards, or to understand mental health by visiting asylums.

This, I think, is one reason why the depiction of human beings before the story of the fall is so sparse: fallenness is so much a part of our reality that we cannot even concretely imagine what the alternative would be like in any detail. What would daily life be like for someone who did not know grief, want, loss, or mortality, and who was untouched by anger, resentment, jealousy, greed, ambition, deception, injustice, fear, grief, or the desire for what belongs to another? The fact is that it is so different from my condition that I cannot say. I can indeed compare times in my life when these things were more prominent with times when they were less so, but what it would be like to be completely without them is a mystery to me. Human life as I know it is painted in no small measure in their colors. No honest novelist could go very far in depicting life in Eden. If she wrote it in terms intelligible to the unfallen, it would ring strange upon our ears. If she wrote it in terms intelligible to us, it would not be truly Eden. Thus, in the story itself, our generation is depicted as completely cast out, prevented from even concretely understanding that blessed state of being from which we are cut off.

Yet for Christians this is not the whole story. It is not a story simply of a past utopia forever lost to us. There are at least two crucial further points. The first of

these, to be elaborated over the remaining chapters, is that it is not God's intent that we persist in this fallen state, but rather that we be reconciled with Him and restored to our proper state, and perhaps even something better than that depicted in Genesis 2. The second is that it tells us certain things about the nature of our fallen state, and what it would mean to be restored and reconciled.

If Genesis 3 is "the story of the fall", *from what* did humanity fall? I think the one clear answer in the story is that we fell out of *right relationship with God*. This is most poignantly illustrated when God comes to walk in the garden and looks for Adam and Eve and they are hiding themselves from him. Much is left implicit here, but it seems to be clearly implied that, *before* the fall, human beings were routinely in communication with God in ways most of us would find quite foreign. Precisely *because* it is so foreign to us today, we have a hard time imagining what this might have been like – though we can see how to an audience 3000 years ago it might be most naturally communicated by speaking of God "walking" in the garden and conversing with Adam and Eve. Perhaps this had something in common with the experiences of prophets and mystics in recorded history, perhaps not. But even those experiences are conveyed in terms that are difficult for the rest of us to understand. Yet even so, we might at very least say that it seems to have been an experience characterized by both *personal presence* and *communication*.

A second implicit feature of the relationship is *trust*. When first tempted by the serpent, Eve seems never previously to have questioned what God had conveyed to her. Indeed, so deep is her prior trust that the serpent needs to subtly suggest

alternatives in order for her to be tempted. She does not conceive the idea of eating the forbidden fruit for herself.

Much of Christian commentary upon Genesis 3 has focused upon a third theme – obedience and disobedience. For these commentators, the key feature of the story is that God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *and they disobeyed*. And of course this is true: God *did* command this and they *did* disobey. Disobedience to God is indeed a central part of the Christian understanding of sin. When God says “thou shalt not do *this*”, and I do *this*, it is a very serious matter, both because the things God forbids are presumably not a good idea in their own right and, perhaps more fundamentally, because it involves a kind of rejection of God. There can be no question for Christians but that disobedience to what is understood to be God’s commandment is a very serious matter. Whatever else the story is supposed to teach us, one thing it is supposed to teach us is that, when God has seen fit to tell us to do something, or not to do something else, we ought to take that very, very seriously.

But that is not the entirety of what is suggested by the story. The serpent does not simply say, “God says do not eat, but you are a free agent, and so you may eat.” The serpent actively misdirects Eve so that she stops thinking about God at all, and starts thinking about the imagined benefits of eating the fruit in its own right. The serpent does not tempt her by saying “disobey God”, but by saying “hey, look at this beautiful fruit – it’s delicious and nutritious and will make you wise!” This is an important and subtle point about what has been called “moral psychology”. We don’t think about a thing *in its entirety*, but only under particular aspects. If you can



get someone to think about a thing under the aspects that get them to do what you want, and to forget all the aspects that might lead to a different action, you can control them. And how many of our mistakes have come about as a result of thinking about a decision on the basis of *these* considerations and not *those* considerations!

But the most important parts of the story, in my view, are those that occur after the eating of the fruit. It is true that we have little description of Adam and Eve's psychology before then, but there seems to be a clear implication that something has changed: they hide themselves from God, they are ashamed of their bodies, they attempt to shift responsibility for their actions. If these are indeed changes, this suggests differences between our fallen and unfallen states. Humans are intended to be present before God in continual and daily interaction without shame and to take responsibility for their own actions. There is conflict in this only when our actions are in conflict with God and thus invoke shame.

Of course, all of this might seem very alien to us if the idea of intimate daily communion with God is not part of our experience. Indeed. This is *precisely the point*. The whole Creation narrative is one whose point is that our nature has been corrupted – from one that is in deep communion with our creator to one that is, at best, guided by short-sighted ideals and is, at worst, dominated by our worst impulses.

## Broken and Empty Vessels

I wish to conclude by connecting the idea that our natures are fallen with the accounts of the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 and 2. The combined narrative of creation and the fall suggests a theological account of our situation – or, more exactly, a *sacred anthropology*, or story about *humans* told in theological terms. Such a story might be told as follows. Our proper state is one in which our material bodies are a kind of vessel or dwelling for God's Holy Spirit. This is a very intimate sort of union between God and human, in which we continually turn towards God and God reveals such parts of His will as are proper for us to understand. But God's Spirit does not dwell in an unwilling host. God may be the great Lover, but he is not a ravisher. If the soul turns away from God and to its own desires or to external things, thereby making God unwelcome, the Holy Spirit withdraws. But this leaves the soul incomplete and disordered. It is like an emptied vessel – a glove without a hand, a flask without water, a balloon without air. Without the Holy Spirit, it has only its own desires and its own imperfect understanding as a guide to what is good. Inevitably, it does what is wrong. But those wrong actions are merely a consequence of the more basic problem that the soul has become literally Godless, in the sense that it has rejected the indwelling Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, a person is no longer like God (any more than an empty glove is more than a flattened and wrinkled facsimile of a human hand), and the image of God in us is distorted. The soul is no longer filled with Divine light, but is darkened, and must grope about on the basis of its own beliefs and desires. It has become merely a material creature

made of earth. It may still be a very clever creature, and one that bears traces of the divine image in having imperfect capacities for knowledge and love; but it is, at best, an amalgam of beast and computer, of monkey and Macintosh.

And in this process, true freedom is lost. For one cannot regain what is most essential to one's original human nature by groping about on the basis of one's desires and one's own best understanding of what is good. What is essential is that original communion with God. And that is not something we can recover on our own. Communion is a *relationship*, and relationship is something that can never be forced. Even God cannot force it, and thus God withdraws from the soul that rejects him. And we cannot force it either. No good deeds we perform, and no magical rites, can compel the Holy Spirit to re-enter the soul. And so we are left to our own devices, and we are left to them because that is what we choose. In the end, we even forget that something else was ever available. We fall into the illusion that we are simply individual material organisms, consigned to make the best of things through our own cleverness. We mistake our disfigured desires for what is really good for us, and our own distorted beliefs for truth. This view of humans – the view of the Enlightenment – is really a result of the “endarkenment” of the soul.

## 5

### The Bad News and the Good

This chapter will be different in tone from those that have come before it. In those chapters, I presented some basic Christian beliefs – about the creation of the world by God, about our own creation from the dust of the earth but in the image and likeness of God, and about the fallen state of our world and of human nature as we find it. The way I talked about these topics was not what a college professor like myself would consider *scholarly*: I tried to steer clear of the abstract theories of theologians and philosophers, and of the disputes among their proponents. But it was nonetheless *somewhat* abstract, in the sense that it dealt mainly with *ideas about* God, human beings, and the world we inhabit, and did not say much about how those ideas connect with your life or mine. Perhaps you will nonetheless have made some such connections on your own, but it is necessary at this point to speak in a different tone. Christians do indeed have a distinctive set of beliefs about God, the world, and the human condition. But Christianity is not exclusively or even chiefly a set of beliefs or a philosophical theory. At its core it is a way of living in relationship with God. It's true that one could not be a Christian or live this

particular way of life without certain beliefs. But merely having those beliefs is not enough to make a person a Christian, either.

At this point, of course, I have not said very much either about what *does* make a person a Christian, or about the beliefs that are indeed most distinctively Christian: beliefs about Jesus, salvation, sanctification, or eternal life. These will be the topics of later chapters. The Bible, and Jesus himself, do indeed talk about these topics. But if you read about Jesus in the Gospels, you will find that he did not go about teaching a system of ideas the way a Greek philosopher might. He did, indeed, teach things, both to the crowds that came to listen to him and to a smaller group of disciples. But mostly what you will find in the Gospels are encounters he had with individuals and groups of people, encounters which dramatically changed their lives.

Both Jesus' teachings and something about his personal presence and interactions with other people called people into a change of life and a renewed relationship with God. It didn't always work – a *call* does not always evoke the desired sort of *response*. Some of the people Jesus interacted with rejected him. Others left puzzled, not knowing what to make of this man who spoke and acted as no one else did. When people's lives *were* changed, they were often people who already understood very clearly that their lives were *in need of* changing, or else came to understand it through their encounter with Jesus. In some sense, they understood in a very personal manner what was discussed in a more theoretical way in the last chapter: that their relationships with God and others were in disarray, and that the image and likeness of God was distorted in them, and their condition fallen. But they did not understand this as a thesis in some abstract

philosophical discussion, but as the pressing reality of their own lives, one to which they urgently desired a remedy.

The goal of this chapter is thus to form a bridge between the discussions of Christian *belief* that make up the chapters before and after it by turning to what Christians regard as the fundamental *experience* that is distinctive of Christianity: that of being “saved”, “redeemed”, and “reconciled with God”. This will begin with a new discussion of the topic of our fallen nature in more personal terms, and then turn, from an equally personal standpoint, to the Christian notion of “being saved”.

## **The Bad News That Precedes the Good**

One of the central components of any view of the world is the story it tells about the human condition. The Christian understanding of the human condition is a kind of good news/bad news story. Indeed, the Christian message is *called* “the Good News”, which is the modern English translation of the Biblical Greek word *euangelion*. (Our modern English word ‘evangelism’ literally means “spreading the Good News”. The word ‘gospel’ is an Old English way of saying “Good News” (*godspel*) as well.) What is this Good News? The Bible tells us that it is that we can be *saved*, and hence the essential Christian message is one of salvation.

But for many people today, the idea of “being saved” is quite puzzling. If you think you need to be saved from something, it is clearly good news if you find out

that salvation is on its way. A person shipwrecked at sea is overjoyed to see someone in a boat coming to save her, but a person sitting comfortably at home would be perplexed and annoyed at someone who came to the door saying he had come to save her, and downright astonished if he had brought a life raft. Someone who knew he had a terrible disease would be delighted to be told that the doctors have a cure, but imagine if you thought you were healthy and the doctor came in beaming and announced, “Good news! We have a cure for you!” There are certain types of good news that only make sense *as* good news if you already know the *bad* news – say, that the ship you are on is sinking or that you have a terminal illness.

C.S. Lewis wrote that this is a fundamental difference between people today and the people in Jesus’s day – pagans and Jews living in the Roman Empire. They were already firmly convinced that there were things they needed to be saved from, whereas this idea is foreign to most modern Westerners. In order to be ready to hear the Christian message as Good News, we first need to learn the bad news that there is something we need to be saved from. Not everyone needs to be convinced of this, of course. The alcoholic who has hit bottom knows his life is being ruined by a problem he cannot control. People who are enslaved or oppressed know they need to be saved. But for those of us who lead relatively happy and comfortable lives, the idea that there is something we need to be saved from may seem alien, even ridiculous, in which case the Christian message may sound like the news of a lifeboat outside our landlocked house or a medical cure that we have no need of.

So the job of this chapter is primarily to try to present, as clearly as possible, the idea that we all need to be saved from something. But that is not the *entirety* of

the Christian story about human nature and the human condition. We have already discussed two strands of that story in the previous chapters. On the one hand, human beings were created in God's image and likeness, fashioned from inert matter as vessels for God's Spirit, and given stewardship over creation. On the other hand, the idyllic picture this might suggest is severely at odds with the evils of the world we see around us – war, murder, rape, lies, theft, slavery – and (if there was any doubt) the Old Testament stories make it abundantly clear that these are no new problems and were all too familiar to the writers of the Bible.

In the last chapter, we discussed two aspects of our fallen world. On the one hand, it is a world in which *bad things happen to us*. This is something that each of us can understand in our own way, even if our individual situations are very different from one another. Our lives may be marred by war, misfortune, criminal acts, systemic injustice, or simply being surrounded by neighbors, co-workers, or family members who are petty, manipulative, cruel, or even sociopathic. We are also subject to diseases, accidents, and natural disasters that are no one's fault and beyond our ability to control. Even if we are spared these, life is fraught with many painful and challenging times, such as the need for hard work, the grief of losing a loved one, and the inevitable prospect of one's own death. While some people's lives are, from an earthly standpoint, much happier than others, we all have griefs and sorrows that are not how we would want the world to be, and perhaps not how it *should* be, and from which we might long to be delivered.

On the other hand, we ourselves are not, or at least not fully, the sorts of people we might wish to be. There are things we have done that we wish we could



go back and undo, but are instead left with the harm and resultant guilt they have caused. And, more deeply, there are things about ourselves we would wish to change but find that we cannot. And, indeed, each person's faults are intertwined with the burdens others are forced to bear. We wear our faults like thorns on a vine, and our lives are so entangled with one another that we find our thorns tearing at one another, not only because of our worst intentions, but often in spite of our best.

## **Two Needs to Be Saved**

From each of these situations, a person might well feel the desire to be delivered. People who feel powerless and oppressed feel a need to be saved from their situation because they cannot do so for themselves. This is a frequent theme in the Bible. The Jewish people are enslaved by the Egyptians in the Book of Exodus, and are later conquered by Babylon and deported there against their wills. They cry out for God to save them, and eventually he does so, in the first case through the miraculous events recounted in the book of Exodus and in the second through the decree of King Cyrus of Persia after he defeated the Babylonians. The deliverance from captivity in Egypt is still celebrated annually by Jews around the world, and many other oppressed people (such as slaves in America) have seen in it a figure for their own situation. But the Old Testament also contains stories of injustice and oppression *within* the Jewish nation, and cries for deliverance are found in the words of the Psalms and the voices of the prophets.

It is little surprise that this aspect of the Bible has most easily been taken to heart by people who are the victims of oppression. Christianity first took root primarily among lower economic classes in lands oppressed by the Romans, and some upper-class Romans viewed Christianity as a “slave religion”. And in my own nation, the United States, it has found some of its profoundest expression in the songs and preaching of African-American slaves and their descendents, who saw in the story of Israel’s slavery in Egypt and God’s deliverance of them a metaphor for their own oppression and their deliverance from it. The Jewish people, whose story makes up the bulk of the Old Testament, have been persecuted in almost every time and place, and these old stories still resonate powerfully with them. And for them, in Jesus’ day as in our own, when the Bible speaks of God sending a “Messiah” to save or deliver them, they have often seen it as meaning that God would specifically send someone who would free them from external political oppression and re-establish for them a kingdom of their own. From the standpoint of people who are oppressed, exploited, persecuted, or abused, or who are refugees from such conditions, a God who is dismayed and angry at injustice and oppression can only be seen as a good thing, the hope beyond hope, and the only question is “How long, o Lord, how long?”

Of course, many people are exploited and abused all around us. You don’t need to have a tyrant, a Gestapo, or a system of slavery to be oppressed. The father who beats up his wife or children, the boss who harasses employees, or the neighborhood bully can make people’s lives so miserable that they are tempted to run away, take drugs, or take their own lives because their situation feels hopeless

and unbearable. Sins of injustice come in all sizes, and tyrants and Gestapo officers are really bullies and abusers with greater power to practice their sins and more victims at their disposal. Putting it this way puts a different face on the problem. We know wrong when it happens to us; and when it happens to us, it is generally because of something someone did. Oh, there are diseases and natural disasters that are no one's fault, and they can destroy the lives we have built. But most of what robs our lives of joy and dignity comes from other people, and often from ourselves. And it isn't just that there are a few "bad people", and that if they'd just change or go away everything would be fine. Much of the grief we experience comes from perfectly ordinary people who do small and petty things that wound us: the parent who tells her child he will never amount to anything, the friend who teases about something we are insecure about, the sibling or coworker who makes sure he gets a little more or has to come out on top, the people who avoid doing their share of the work leaving others to do more.

And, if we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we have probably all done our share of similar things in our own ways, sometimes without even recognizing it at the time. We each have our own share of ego, fear, greed, jealousy, anger, resentment, laziness, desire for control, and appetites that are not always restrained. In some people, one or more of these conditions is in control of their personality almost all of the time. Some even freely embrace their darker natures. For others, probably most of us, it is a continual struggle. We recognize some of our faults, and from time to time suddenly recognize one that has been at work all along without our knowing it – though the people around us probably saw it long before

we did. We hurt other people “in a bad moment” and then regret it. We try to change, and perhaps have some success, but probably not total success, and perhaps feel recurring pangs of remorse or a sense of shame at our bad temper, our sharp tongue, our boasting or need to be in control. Perhaps, like Adam and Eve, we attempt to hide our faults or redirect the blame for them onto someone else.

The Christian diagnosis of this is that, while much harm and grief come from the bad things people do, the bad things people do come from within. A person takes more than his share because he is greedy or feels an unjustified sense of entitlement. A person says mean things or puts other people down because she is bitter or jealous or wants to look good by making someone else look bad. Some people work hard to keep these urges in check, others do not. Put several billion such people together and you have the world you see around you.

Christians speak of the individual bad actions as *sins*, but also use the word ‘sin’ in the singular as the name of the inner condition that causes those actions. Sins are symptoms of the inner condition of sin, much as a cough or a rash are symptoms of a disease. You can only do so much to restrain a cough. Sometimes it is going to break out. It’s good to carry some cough drops and a handkerchief, but what you really need is a cure.

What I have just described about the human condition as we find it contains no real theology. It is merely a description of what we find when we look realistically at ourselves and those around us. Plenty of non-Christian traditions – Buddhism, some of the Greek philosophical schools – have noted it as well and put it at the center of their diagnosis of the human condition. There is a recognition that

there is a substantial difference between who we *are* and who we *should be*. The capacity to recognize this difference is the basis of morality. Morality is about what we *should* do. If this were always what we *did* do, there would be no need for distinctively moral thinking. We would simply do what is right without thinking about what we ought to do, and there would be no need for recriminations or regrets, because we would never do the things that occasion them. We would have no need for a knowledge of good and evil. But that, of course, is not how we find ourselves or those around us.

Some philosophies and religions stop at the level of good and bad actions, perhaps treating each action as a completely free choice. Some take the view that some people are by nature good, and others are by nature evil – children of light and children of darkness. Some have gone so far as to say that human nature is evil. The Christian view is more complicated. The creation narrative says that we were created in the image and likeness of God, and as vessels for God’s own spirit, and that when God created us he saw that it was good. This says something true about us, and it is a noble truth. But it cannot be the whole truth, as evidenced by the bad things we all do and the urges these spring from. Our nature as we find it seems importantly different from what we read in the creation story. Christians speak of this by saying that our nature is “fallen”: it is not as God intended and desires it to be, and God is grieved and angry at sin, not only because of how it affects others, but also and more fundamentally because it is rooted in a corruption and distortion of our nature as creatures God brought into being out of love. God desires

reconciliation and change rather than vengeance because he loves his creatures, and wants us to live fully into the natures he designed.

### **Powerlessness to Do Good**

We now come to the second way in which we can come to feel a need to be saved. Each of us, at some time or other in our lives, comes to realize several deeply disturbing facts about ourselves. The first of these is that we sometimes (perhaps frequently) do things that we ourselves acknowledge to be wrong. And once they are done, they cannot be taken back. Often we can apologize, and sometimes we can make reparations. Sometimes we can undo the effects of our transgressions. But we are nonetheless haunted by the unfulfillable desire to go back in time and take back what we said or did that was hurtful. We may forgive and be forgiven, but we do not forget. Sometimes these were things we did willfully. Sometimes they were things we did out of habit or reflex, without thinking. And sometimes we found ourselves doing them even while knowing they were wrong and wishing not to do them.

And this leads to the second grim recognition. We sometimes find ourselves in the position of doing things that we hate because we find ourselves powerless to stop doing them. At the extreme end of the spectrum, this is the state of the addict or the person suffering obsessions or compulsions. The alcoholic may hate his drinking even while he sips on his drink. The person in the throes of jealousy or

resentment may hate that state of mind and the things she does while in it, and yet cannot get out of that mindset or prevent herself from acting upon it. And even if we are not in one of these awful states, we all do much of what we do out of habit, and many of our habits are bad. How often have we excoriated ourselves for neglecting the habits of diet and exercise that we believe to be right for us? How often have we intended to be kinder or more thoughtful, or to spend more time with our families and friends, only to find ourselves spending our time on extra work, useless and depleting pastimes, or senseless daydreams? How often have we resolved to do better only to fall short?

And this leads to the third realization: that we are not truly free to do good, even the goods we know and acknowledge and that we wish and intend to do. Even when we desire the good and commit ourselves to doing it, we often find ourselves unable to do it. The point is not that we can *never* do *any* good, but that sometimes we are unable to do what is good or to refrain from what is wrong.

St. Paul gives eloquent voice to this realization in the seventh chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15-24)

I think we all have the material in our own experience to understand this “Romans 7 Experience” that Paul describes: the feeling of moral failure and powerlessness to do good, the inability to make ourselves right. But often we fool ourselves into neglecting the reality of this experience, because we are in the grips of an illusion. It is the illusion that we are completely free, that at any given moment we can choose what is good, and pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps.

Christianity teaches that this view of moral bootstrapping is an illusion, and I think that if we examine our own experience, we will see that Christian teaching is correct on this matter. This is *not* a theological doctrine that needs to be taken on faith. It is a matter of honest assessment of our own moral experience. Sometimes we are unable to do good because of ignorance. If we do not know what is good, we cannot do it. And all too often we do not know what is the right thing to do. Even when we act on our best guesses as to what is good, sometimes it turns out to be all wrong. At very least, the outcome may be tragically different from what we intended, and often we realize later that our motives were not as pure as we had supposed. But even beyond this, even when we know what is good, we sometimes find ourselves, like St. Paul, unable to *do* it. Either we do something we acknowledge to be wrong out of habit, only to realize later that we have erred, or we do it in full recognition that it is wrong, and we stand condemned by our own conscience even in the midst of the act. We find that our attempts at moral improvement often fall short, and we find ourselves doing the same old wretched, petty, mean-spirited things over and over again, and cannot find our way out of the snarl we are tangled



in. We cannot save ourselves from it, and need someone else to save us from ourselves.

I suspect that, unless you have had this experience, the Christian Good News of Salvation will be very difficult to make sense of. You cannot understand the Christian message as Good News unless you are first acquainted with the bad news that there is something from which you need to be saved, and that, in spite of your best efforts, you cannot save yourself. The Good News needs to be received by faith. But the bad news is a matter of experience if only we have the honesty to acknowledge it.

I find one of the clearest recognitions of this in the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. As long as an alcoholic is persuaded that her problem is one she can solve herself through her own efforts, she is not ready for AA. It is only when she recognizes that there is a problem that is beyond her control that she can work the steps of the program. Then she needs to turn the problem over to God, and ask God to solve the problem with her. This is a powerful insight. But it is not limited to alcoholism and other substance addictions. It is a general insight about the forces within us that keep us from being the good creatures God intended. Even if you do not have a substance addiction, there is still some area of your life to which the principle applies. There are things where the solution is not to be found in harder work. These are things from which you need to be saved, and you cannot save yourself.

The Christian interpretation of this experience is that human nature is no longer in the uncorrupted state that is expressed in the narrative of Adam and Eve

before the fall. Rather, our state is fallen. And in this fallen state, we can no longer freely choose the good. We are, to one extent or another, enslaved to our own beliefs, desires, and habits. Often, we cannot rightly see the good; and when we do see it, often we cannot make ourselves do it. It is not simply that we freely choose to do what is wrong, but that we are *unable* to always freely choose what is right. We are not morally free, or at least not completely morally free. We are, to one extent or another, morally enslaved to our own passions and our own ignorance.

The Christian view is much like the view taken in AA: we cannot get ourselves out of the mess that we are in. We need to be saved by God. And God cannot save us unless we are *willing to be saved*, and invite Him into our hearts in order that our hearts may be transformed. Alcoholics speak of “hitting bottom”: that state in which we recognize our wretchedness and powerlessness and are willing to do anything to be released from it. Hitting bottom is perhaps the most unpleasant state a human being experiences. But it is also the threshold of salvation. For it is at that point that we recognize, without a doubt, the need to give up on trying to do it ourselves, and to turn control over to God, inviting him into our hearts to forgive what we have done and to change us from the inside out. It is only in this state of bottoming out that we fully appreciate and accept the bad news that we are, in fact, slaves and not free. But it is also from this standpoint that we can appreciate the Good News that God has already acted decisively to free us, and offers that salvation as a free gift to any who will simply receive it.

Of course, some people are lucky enough to understand their predicament without hitting bottom. God is always willing to step in and help. The limiting factor

is in us, in our unwillingness to give up control and let Him in. Whether you have hit bottom or merely see the abyss into which you are falling, you can call out to God and be saved.

## **The Good News**

The central message of Christianity – the Good News – is that God is eager to save us, forgive our sins, transform our nature so that we are no longer enslaved to sin, and restore living communion with Himself and with one another. Indeed, Christians believe that God desires this so much that he took on human form, living among us as the man Jesus of Nazareth, to share this Good News, and was willing to die on a cross and be raised on the third day to make it possible. The central moment in any human life is when we realize our need to be saved, and cry out to God to accept the salvation he offers. When we do so, there is a transformation so profound that it amounts to beginning life anew. Indeed, Christians speak of it as a “rebirth” or being “born again” into a new and everlasting life. One of the best-known verses in the Bible puts it like this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

This rebirth is not something we can do for ourselves, and there is nothing we can do to earn it. Indeed, the whole point is that, precisely because we cannot do it for

ourselves, and are fallen in ways that make us incapable of earning it, God reaches out proactively, offering it as a free gift.

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24)

But it is not quite the case that we need to do *nothing*. We are *offered* salvation and new life as a free gift, but even a gift needs to be *received* in order for it to become one's own. Suppose someone says, "I've left a gift for you on the table in the living room." Perhaps it's something you've always wanted to have, and have urgent need of right now. It's right there waiting for you on the table, but in order to claim and make use of it, you have to go and open the box. Indeed, if you never do so, you have effectively rejected the gift. Or suppose you receive the news that someone has left you a large inheritance that would solve all of your financial problems. It's welcome news, but the money is not truly yours (even if it is *reserved* for you) until you sign the papers and have it transferred into your account. Or suppose there is someone you have wronged and become alienated from. He comes and says "I've forgiven you, even though you did not ask for it, and want to start our friendship over again." He holds out his hand – the offer is there, but you are not reconciled until you accept the offer. In the same way, God's act of *offering* salvation is not completed until we *accept* it.

In one way, receiving a gift or accepting an offer of forgiveness and reconciliation is the easiest thing in the world – all we have to do is say "yes". But, oddly enough, it can sometimes be very difficult to say "yes". It may not be a gift that we think we want or need. We might prefer to try to earn things on our own

and not want to accept the generosity of others. And accepting an offer of forgiveness and reconciliation requires us to admit that we have done something that needs to be forgiven and that the relationship is broken. In the same way, the gift of salvation may be free, but it is not always easy for us to receive it. We may not think it something we either want or need, or even if we know we need it, our pride may hold us back.

And this brings us back to where we began the chapter: the Good News of salvation really only appears as good and welcome news to the extent that we already understand the bad news that we are not just people who have done some bad things, but that our inner nature is corrupted and fallen in such a way that we cannot be the people we were meant to be without God's help. If you already believe this, you may of course still doubt that the Christian message is true – you may not believe in God at all, or believe in a God who hates you or takes no notice of you – but you are at least in a position to see it as a message that is truly Good News *if it is true*. If you do not believe it, the Christian message is likely to seem irrelevant or even comprehensible, or perhaps at most something that might be of use to *other* people, like those with substance addictions who have hit bottom and lost every other hope.

If you do not believe the *bad* news, there is no point in my saying anything to try to convince you. If you were ever to change your mind, it would have to be on the basis of your own experience and self-reflection. True, hearing the testimony of others can help us to see our own situation in a new light. And, like countless others,

my own experience is that, the better I come to know myself, the more I understand that there are parts of me that I cannot make right through my own efforts.

If you are in the other situation – if you see the Christian Good News as something that would speak to your situation *if it is true*, but are unsure whether it *is* true, here I do have counsel to offer. Many people have been in the same position before you: not being sure whether there really is a God, or unsure whether any God there might be would really offer such a gift. And most people who accept the gift of salvation do so without a very deep understanding of what Christians believe about God. And none of this seems to matter. Being saved does require a seed of faith – but the “faith” involved is more a matter of *hopeful trust* than of adopting a theologically-correct set of *beliefs*. It is like being adrift at sea in the dark of night, and thinking you hear a voice say “Reach out over there and you will find a lifeline.” You don’t have to know all the details about who the rescuer is, and certainly not what kind of boat he is in or whether the lifeline is made of hemp or nylon. You just need to have enough trust to reach out for it. Indeed, you might have enough trust for that even if the darkness of the night and the terror of the deep have made you so unsure of your own mind that you wonder whether you are hearing a real voice or hallucinating. Reaching out does require a certain amount of trust, but it does not require anything like certainty. From a theoretical standpoint, you may have doubts – how could there be a rescue boat just when and where I need it, and how could they have found me in the dark? But from a practical standpoint, these are not what is important. You are adrift at sea without hope of saving yourself, and (however improbably) an opportunity to be rescued seems to have appeared. The only way of

finding out what will happen if you reach out in hopes of finding a lifeline is to actually reach out and grasp for it. And it is only by doing so that you will ever find out more about your rescuer or the circumstances of your rescue.

### **What Must I Do To Be Saved?**

As you might expect, Christian theologians over the centuries have written a great deal on the subject of salvation, the role of Jesus in it, and its effects upon those who receive it. I shall discuss such topics in the chapters that follow, but it is important to understand that being saved does not depend upon comprehending some complicated theological theory. If you read the Biblical accounts of Jesus' interactions with other people, you will not find abstract lectures on theology there. Rather, you will find God reaching out to people in Jesus in very direct and personal ways and their immediate and life-changing responses. It is the same for each of us. People who become Christians may come to have a deep desire to know more about Jesus, and some even study theology, but you don't have to know abstract theology to be saved, and knowing abstract theology will not save you.

What, then, must a person do to be saved?

The first step is to acknowledge that you *need* to be saved – that you have done things in need of forgiveness and, more fundamentally, that your life is broken in ways that you cannot set aright on your own. Perhaps you have made countless

efforts to improve or fix yourself, tried self-discipline, therapy, or self-help books, and maybe it even made some difference, but did not result in a thorough and life-changing transformation. Perhaps you have scarcely even tried. Whatever your past, the crucial thing is the recognition that there is something you *need* but *cannot do for yourself*, or even with the help of others.

The second step is to believe, to trust, or at least to hope that God can do for you what you cannot do for yourself: that God wants to change you, be in relationship with you, and invites you to a new and transformed life, and offers this salvation through Jesus as a free gift, which you only have to accept in order to receive it.

The third step is to actively accept the gift that God offers in Jesus by confessing your faults and your inability to change them on your own and inviting Jesus into your heart. The exact words you use to do this do not matter. It is not some sort of magical incantation, but an act of the will in which we turn things over to God and invite Him to enter into and take control over our lives. Indeed, some people probably find that the crucial moment came without any words they can remember at all. But words help us to make an inner change, and sometimes it even helps to say them aloud. You will find many versions of such “prayers of acceptance”, [several of which I have included in an Appendix,] but here is a simple one that contains the essentials.

God, I am a sinner. I have sinned against you and other people, and I cannot save myself. But I trust that you can save me through Jesus. I ask you to forgive my sins, and remove the causes of sin within me. I thank you for the free gift of salvation you offer through Jesus, and I accept this gift. Lord, I



invite you to come into my life and be Lord of it. I give up my self-will and turn everything over to you, and promise to follow wherever you lead.

## 6

### Salvation

In the last chapter, I explored the need for salvation from the standpoint of human experience. A morally honest self-examination ultimately reveals to us that there are parts of our lives that are broken, distorted, and out of our control; and if there is to be any remedy for our situation at all, it cannot come wholly from ourselves. We cannot save ourselves, and hence need someone else to save us. This fundamental realization is the doorstep to Christianity: the bad news we need to understand before we can understand the Christian Good News that God is ready and willing to save us – indeed, has already done all that is needed to prepare for us the free gift of salvation, so that all we need to do is to accept it. Becoming a Christian is really as simple as that: giving up our self-will and insistence on being in charge of our own lives and turning ourselves over to God’s grace and mercy so that he might give us new lives led in intimate relationship with him – indeed, lives in which he in some sense lives within us.

This life-changing experience, which is what is called “conversion” or “being born again”, is really the heart of Christianity. You don’t need to understand much theology in order to obtain it. It is as readily available to the simplest trusting soul

as it is to the most sophisticated theologian or philosopher. And being released from the burden of sin and guilt and beginning a new life with God is far more important than the acquisition of any knowledge. As Jesus describes it, it is the “pearl of great price” that a person would do well to give up everything else to obtain. It is also the foundation of all further Christian understanding: it was in light of this kind of life-changing experience that the earliest Christians came to re-conceive everything about our relationship with God. Without it, Christian *beliefs* would amount to little more than another airy philosophical theory – and an improbable-sounding one at that, as it is really only in light of the experience of spiritual rebirth and a new life with God that any of it fully makes sense. It is for this reason that I approached the topic of salvation first in terms of experience rather than belief.

Of course, the experience itself raises questions of its own: *what* has taken place, and *how* does it come about? And of course Christians do have beliefs about salvation and the spiritual life that follows. One of these can be seen as a direct continuation of the story that began in the creation narratives. You will recall that in Genesis 2 it is said that God breathed his own breath or spirit into the human being he had created. Christians believe that, in addition to being natural creatures made of “the dust of the earth”, human beings were also created to be vessels for God’s own spirit, which Christians refer to as the Holy Spirit. A proper relationship with God does not consist merely in obeying commandments handed down on a mountain top, but in the much more intimate relationship of having God’s own Spirit

dwelling within us, illuminating our souls. It is only in this condition that human nature is complete and whole. The fundamental cause of the fallenness of human nature is that, when we turn away from God and insist on our own will instead, God withdraws, leaving our souls darkened and our natures deformed, like a deflated balloon or an empty glove in want of a hand. Conversely, when we relinquish our own will and invite God into our hearts, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within us, illuminates us from within, and begins to set things right again in our lives.

This is a theme to which we will return when we discuss sanctification in chapter [7]. But there is also a great deal to discuss about the Christian notion of salvation before we return to the work of the Holy Spirit. For thus far we have spoken only briefly and in passing about the most obviously distinctive feature of Christian belief: the role Jesus the Christ. I use the somewhat awkward phrase “Jesus the Christ” here, and not the simpler and more familiar “Jesus Christ”, because “Jesus” is a *name*, and “Christ” is a *title*. The phrase “Jesus Christ” is thus something like the phrase “President Lincoln” – Lincoln’s first name was not “President”, and “Christ” is not Jesus’s last name, but a title, like “President” or “Lord”. It literally means “anointed one” (*christos* in Greek) – someone who is specially chosen and marked by God through anointing with oil.

Indeed, while Christians regard this as a very special title, the literal meaning greatly understates what Christians believe about Jesus. For Christians believe that Jesus was not simply a man who was specially chosen by God – the way Abraham, Moses, the prophets, or King David were chosen for important purposes – but *was himself God* in human form. By this we do not mean that God merely *appeared* in

human form, as though it were some sort of illusion, or even a spiritual vision. What Christians believe, rather, is that there was an historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, who was also God, and had been present at the creation of the world. Or, to put it the other way around, God himself also came down and lived a real human life among us some two thousand years ago. The words and actions of the man Jesus were thus also the words and actions of God. Christians believe that Jesus was not merely a prophet – a man who heard the words of God and conveyed them to others; when Jesus spoke, it was God himself speaking, and when Jesus acted, it was God himself acting. And in this regard, Jesus was unique among human beings: God became incarnate *only once*. And thus Christians believe that Jesus' words and deeds carry a divine authority that we do not find in the words and actions of any other human being.

This is, to be sure, a remarkable claim. Indeed, it is this claim that was one of the chief reasons that both the Jews and the pagans who first heard the Christian message found it difficult to accept. Jews share with Christians the very high conception of God described in the exposition of Genesis 1 in chapter [2]: that there is one God who is the creator of everything else that exists, including human beings. The gulf between God and created things is so great that in the Jewish religion it is considered sacrilege even to depict God in a statue or painting. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day certainly considered it sacrilege when he referred to God as his father, and even more so when he went on to say "I and the Father are one". (John 10:30) For pagans, the relationship between gods and mortals was more fluid. For one thing, they did not understand their gods to be the transcendent creator of the

universe, but powerful beings within the universe. And in their myths, gods would occasionally appear in human-like form, spending time among mortals, sometimes even having children with them. These hybrid offspring were called “demigods” – literally, half-gods – and were understood to be both human and divine in something like the sense that a mule is both horse and donkey. (Which is to say a *cross between* the two, and hence neither fully one thing nor the other.) Christians, by contrast, believe that Jesus was neither a demigod nor a god merely appearing in human guise, but was rather both fully human and fully divine. He was conceived through miraculous means to a virgin mother, but was born in Bethlehem and grew up in the town of Nazareth; he ate, drank, and slept; he learned the trade of carpentry from his mother Mary’s husband Joseph; he traveled in Galilee and Judea preaching, healing, and performing miracles, gathered a group of disciples, ran afoul of the religious authorities, and was executed on a cross by the Romans at the insistence of the Jewish religious leaders. And Christians believe one more remarkable thing about him: that on the third day after his execution, he arose from the dead, appeared to his disciples over a period of fifty days, and then ascended into heaven after instructing them to spread the Good News of salvation to all corners of the world.

It is a remarkable story, and one which, even on so brief a telling, gives rise to a number of questions. Some of these, of course, are about its credibility. (Can a story that makes such unusual claims be true? Are the authors and the testimony they give credible?) Others involve some very difficult theological issues.

(Christians believe that Jesus is God, but also call him the Son of God, and they also

believe that the Holy Spirit is God, though distinct from the Father and the Son. Yet they also believe that there is only one God.) I shall discuss some such questions [in Chapter 9]. But in the current context, perhaps the most urgent question is, “What does all this have to do with salvation?”

The short answer is that Christians believe that salvation is accomplished *through Jesus*. One of the most frequently-quoted verses of the Bible sums it up like this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17, NRSV)

But this only invites the further question of *just how* Jesus fits into the story of salvation. And this is the kind of question that seems to be in need of something like a *theory* of salvation to provide a satisfying answer. As we shall see, Christians have suggested several such theories – what theologians call “theories of atonement”. These may not be incompatible with one another, but they are certainly different in their content. I shall discuss several of these later in the chapter. But, as I have suggested several times in previous chapters, I regard theological theories as something of a secondary matter for Christians. They are attempts to fit the experience of salvation that comes from an encounter with God through Jesus into a framework that accords with our understanding. But I tend to doubt that human understanding is fully up to the task of understanding God in general, or exactly how God saves human beings in particular. And because the living encounter with God in Jesus is more fundamental, it was important to discuss that first.

Of course, any encounter with God is *some particular person's* personal encounter with God, and these are as different in their details as are the lives of the people who have them. I cannot presume to say what *your* encounter with God might be like. But Christian belief is based in no small measure upon the accounts of the authors of the New Testament of the Bible, which present stories about the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the ways his first followers' lives were affected by *their* encounters with him. For those who grew up reading the Bible, these stories may be very familiar already. But this book is intended as well for people who know very little about Jesus or Christianity, so it would be good to provide a bit more than the brief sketch presented above. It is, of course, impossible to tell it all without reproducing much of the Bible, which I do not intend to do here. I should say, however, that nothing I can present can serve as an adequate substitute for reading the Biblical stories themselves – and particularly the Gospels, the books that present the life of Jesus. It is in reading those books, which presumably pass on eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life and words, that we gain our truest and best sense of who Jesus is and what he accomplished. The most I can hope to accomplish is to give the reader who is new to them something of an overview and some points of introduction and orientation.



## **A Brief Overview of the Bible**

As many of the readers of this book may know little about the Bible, it would be useful to give a brief overview of what it contains. What we call the Bible is in one sense a single book – a single bound volume you can hold in your hands or buy at a shop or online – and in another sense it is a compilation of what were originally many separate “books” (that is, distinct works penned by different authors) over the space of many centuries. Indeed, we commonly speak of, say, “*The Book of Genesis*” as “the first *book of the Bible*”, though you would seldom find it today as a separate book in the sense of being packaged as its own stand-alone bound volume. Before it became common to bind documents together in a single large physical volume, it would indeed have been more common to find sections of the Bible in separate volumes, parchments, scrolls, or papyri (depending on the local writing technology), and of course today it can also be found online, where it is not in the form of a *physical* book at all. So the sense in which we speak of the Bible as “a book” really has little to do with how it is packaged. The Bible is a collection of texts which Christians regard as sacred texts inspired by God, though penned by human authors.

### **The Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures**

The Christian Bible is divided into two parts, traditionally called the Old and New Testaments. Scholars prefer to call the former the Hebrew Bible, as it is a collection of documents written (in Biblical Hebrew) before the time of Jesus and

regarded as holy scripture by Jews as well as Christians. In addition to the narratives of the creation and fall described in previous chapters, it contains the holy history of the Jewish people and the actions of God within that history. It also includes books containing the words of prophets – people believed to have been directly spoken to by God – as well as books of sacred poetry (the Psalms, the Song of Solomon) and wisdom (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes).

For Jews, one of the most important parts of it is the Law that God is said to have given as a rule of life for the Jewish people through the prophet Moses, through whose leadership God led them out of slavery in Egypt with miraculous signs and wonders. The central parts of this – the ten commandments – are presented in the Book of Exodus, with a great deal more presented in the books that follow it, called Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Together with Genesis, the first book of the Bible, these are sometimes called the “five Books of Moses” or the “Pentateuch”, or by their Hebrew name, the Torah. This begins with the creation narratives and the story of Eden, and goes on to tell the story of the Jewish people from the time that God first made a covenant with their ancestor Abraham, who was born in a city called Ur (now in Iraq), but to whom God promised a land whose boundaries more or less coincide with those of modern Israel as an inheritance for his descendants. The bulk of Genesis describes the lives of Abraham and three generations of his descendants (Isaac, Jacob who was renamed Israel, and Israel’s twelve sons, whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel). The book concludes with the entire family moving to Egypt to escape a famine.

By the time next book, Exodus, begins several centuries later, their descendants' status has changed dramatically and they have become slaves of the Egyptians, and Exodus tells the story of how God called a prophet named Moses and led them out of slavery with miraculous signs and wonders and then tested and taught them in the wilderness (the Sinai desert) for forty years before bringing them to the "promised land" – that is, the land that had been promised to Abraham. It is during this period that they are given the Law, which instructs them to worship only God, how to behave with one another and with outsiders, and *how* to worship God, particularly in the form of offerings of the first fruits of the harvest and the sacrifice of animals for the forgiveness of sins. The people – now collectively called by the name of their ancestor Israel – come to have a distinctive identity as the people chosen by God to be in a special relationship to Him, bound together not only by blood relationship to one another but also by their collective relationship with God and adherence to the Law's commandments concerning morality, worship, and ritual practices.

The narrative continues (in the Book of Joshua) with God leading Israel to conquer more numerous and powerful nations and take possession of the promised land and enter a period in which they live there in separate tribes without central governance (in Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel). When justice is needed, it is administered by people recognized as judges, and God makes his will known through prophets who hear "the word of the Lord" in special ways. The most important theme of these books is the continual temptation to mix with the other peoples in the land and worship their idols, and to follow their customs rather than the Law handed

down through Moses. Indeed, the central choice framed in the Hebrew scriptures is this: to worship, serve, and obey God, or to fall into the ways of other peoples, worshipping their idols and following their customs, and the choices people make affect not only their spiritual lives but also their worldly fortunes.

Beginning in the two books of Samuel, we see Israel transition in the eleventh century BC from being a nation without central governance into a kingdom, whose rulership is described in the books of Kings and Chronicles. (A good deal is said about the first kings – Saul, David, and Solomon – with far briefer accounts of the reigns of subsequent kings.) The kingdom was divided in about 931 BC into a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and Judah by the Babylonians between 597 and 583 BC, at which time much of the population was relocated to Babylon. Several of the prophetic books of the Old Testament are written during or concerning this “exile”, locating its cause in divine disfavor at the people’s disobedience, and expressing a yearning for their homeland and the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, accompanied by a *spiritual* restoration of Israel to right relationship to God. The political restoration came about in 538 BC, when Cyrus of Persia, having defeated the Babylonians, sent the Israelites back to their native land and provided funding to rebuild the Temple (the center of Jewish spiritual identity and the site of sacrifices). Israel was later re-conquered by Alexander and then the Romans, though these events occurred after the last events recorded in the Old Testament.

It is in connection with this hope for political and spiritual restoration that the term “Messiah” (Hebrew *mashiach*) is often used in the Bible. The term literally means “anointed one” – someone marked with oil to indicate a special calling as a king, a priest, or a prophet. In times of foreign occupation, such as the Roman occupation during which Jesus lived, the idea that God would raise up a new Jewish king from David’s descendants to establish and rule an independent Israel figured prominently in the idea of the Messiah, but the Messiah was also often understood to be someone who had the attributes of a priest (someone who acted as an intermediary between God and other human beings) and a prophet (someone with whom God communicated directly). A mere political king would not necessarily restore the nation to righteousness and faithfulness to God – after all, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been allowed to fall because of their unrighteousness – and so there was a sense of a need for a priestly prophet like Moses as well as an earthly king like David, and Jewish thinkers disagreed as to whether these would be the same person or two different individuals.

### **The New Testament**

The second part of the Christian Bible is called the New Testament. It begins with four books called Gospels, each of which presents in its own way the words, life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus. These are named after the people that are traditionally thought to have written them: two disciples of Jesus named Matthew and John, Mark (by tradition a disciple of St. Peter) and Luke (a companion

of St. Paul). Most of the other books that make up the New Testament are letters circulated in the first century of the Church. Many are letters from Saint Paul, a man who initially persecuted Christians but later became one himself after a life-changing vision in which Jesus spoke to him, and subsequently became a leader of the Church. Some of Paul's letters are addressed to particular Christian communities and are known by the names of the cities in which their original recipients resided: Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians. Others are letters to the leaders Paul had left in communities he had visited and are named for the individuals to whom they are addressed: Timothy, Titus, Philemon. There are also letters traditionally believed to have been written by other apostles, and named for their assumed authors: James, John, Jude. One book, the Acts of the Apostles, is a short history of the early Church. The final book of the New Testament, called Revelation or the Apocalypse, reports a vision of someone calling himself "John" and "the Elder", traditionally assumed to have been the disciple John (also traditionally believed to have been the author of the Gospel and letters bearing that name), who is reputed to have lived to very old age before dying on the Greek Isle of Patmos around the year 100.

The four Gospels do not all recount the same events in Jesus' life, and differ in style, emphasis, and most likely in intended readership. Still, there are striking similarities between three of them – those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Indeed, there are many passages contained, verbatim or with minor differences, in all three. Most contemporary Biblical scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was written first, and that the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke incorporated much of

its text into their own accounts, adding a number of sayings of Jesus (perhaps from memory or oral tradition, or perhaps from another pre-existing written compilation of Jesus' sayings that has otherwise been lost to history). Matthew's Gospel seems to have been written with a Jewish audience in mind, as it makes connections with Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, whereas the beginning of Luke's Gospel, addressed to a Roman nobleman, suggests that it was intended primarily for a gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) audience. Because of the many similarities between these three books, scholars refer to them collectively as the Synoptic (same-viewpoint) Gospels.

The Synoptic Gospels are in a sense *biographical*: they present events in the earthly life of Jesus – primarily the three years of his ministry, some of his teachings, life-changing encounters with various people he met, miraculous deeds he performed, his conflicts with the religious and secular authorities, his arrest, trial, execution – and most remarkably, the claim that he rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples (students), ascended into heaven, and gave them a mission to spread the Good News throughout the world, not only to other Jews but to every tribe and nation. Those present at this “great commission” to spread the Good News were thereafter called “apostles”, meaning “those who are sent out”, and the title was later extended to St. Paul as well. The Gospel of John is very different in tone. It is theological through and through, setting the life of Jesus in the context of the entire history of creation and God's plan for salvation. (We will look at it, along with the other Gospels, shortly.)

The Acts of the Apostles is a kind of continuation of Luke's Gospel, written by the same author. It chronicles major events in lives of Jesus' followers after his resurrection, beginning with his ascension into heaven in the sight of his disciples. Perhaps the most important event recounted in the book takes place in Chapter 2, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, when the disciples, gathered in Jerusalem, have a sudden and powerful experience as the Holy Spirit descends upon them. Suddenly, they are preaching the Good News to the Jews who are gathered in Jerusalem for the feast in the many native languages of those present. (This is generally presumed to be a miraculous manifestation of God's power through the Holy Spirit, as the disciples were all from Galilee or Judea, and would not have been fluent in such a range of languages.) Thereafter, they also begin to prophesy, heal the sick, and work miracles, and subsequently go on preaching missions to other places, baptizing people and teaching them.

Two other events in the Book of Acts are especially worthy of note. The first is that gentiles (non-Jews) begin to respond to the Good News as well. This apparently came as quite a surprise to the disciples, who had assumed that the Good News was only for Jews, but in chapter 10 there is a story of Jesus speaking to the disciple Peter in a vision instructing him to make no distinction between Jews and gentiles. Up through the end of the first century, however, at least some Christians – particularly those centered in Jerusalem – seem to have taken the view that becoming a Christian also required one to become a Jew and observe Jewish laws and customs, while the majority came to believe that the non-moral parts of the Law



(for example the kosher laws and the requirement for men to be circumcised) were no longer required.

The second important event was the conversion of a man named Saul of Tarsus, who then took on the new name of Paul. This is the Saint Paul who wrote many of the letters contained in the New Testament. Paul was a talented young Jewish scholar – a training that was no doubt useful in his more theological formulations of the Christian message – who had initially been an enthusiastic persecutor of Christians. In Acts 9, it is reported that Jesus spoke to Paul in a vision, calling him to follow Jesus and to preach the Good News throughout many places in the middle east and the northern Mediterranean, including Greece and Rome. While Paul had not known Jesus during Jesus' lifetime, he is counted as an apostle (literally, "one who is sent"), along with the disciples who received the Great Commission because of his visionary encounter with the risen Christ. According to Christian tradition, some of these other apostles also travelled great distances preaching the Good News – to parts of Africa, Persia, and even the western coast of India. (When European missionaries arrived in India in the fifteenth century, they were surprised to find a group of Christians already there, who claimed that their church had been founded by the apostle Thomas.)

Beyond the Gospels and Acts, the majority of the New Testament is a collection of letters believed to have been written by Paul and other apostles. Some are written to individuals, some to the Christians in particular cities, and others seem to have been intended as general messages to all Christians. While some elements of these letters are very specific to their situations (e.g., Paul's advice to

Timothy concerning the latter's apparent digestive problems or his admonitions to various squabbling factions to be reconciled with one another), they also contain a great deal of important theological reflection on the nature of salvation and how to live a Christian life, both individually and in community. Paul and John, for example, both write moving statements on how love is the crowning virtue of Christian spiritual life. (1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 4) And several letters exhort their readers to be steadfast in their faith during the persecutions that many of them were facing.

The final book of the Bible, called Revelation or the Apocalypse, reports a vision experienced by someone generally understood to be the disciple John in his old age. It is a very perplexing book – indeed, within the text itself it says that the message is “sealed” so that its full meaning will not yet be understandable – but seems to tell about events that will take place when the world as we know it is about to come to an end. There are to be wars on a massive scale, plagues that destroy much of the world's population, much of the sea is rendered incapable of supporting life, something falls from the skies and wreaks much destruction, and a world leader called “Antichrist” arises and persecutes the faithful before Jesus returns in glory, ending the unjust world we are familiar with and establishing a new heaven and a new earth, in which those who are saved will be raised from death to live forever in the presence of God. While the meanings of particular parts of the vision are unclear (and Christians of almost every generation have sought to interpret them in terms of the events of their own times), Revelation has played a large role in shaping the Christian belief that, at some future time, Jesus will return in glory, and the world of pain and injustice we know will be replaced by one in which Jesus will govern a

perfect world, in which both those who have died and those still living at the time of his return will live forever.

## **Jesus in the Gospels**

Christians regard the New Testament as the authoritative source of information about Jesus. In particular, the four Gospels are our primary near-contemporary sources of information about the life of Jesus. So, in trying to understand what Christians believe about Jesus, they are the first place we should turn.

### **Mark's Gospel**

Mark's Gospel is by far the shortest of the four. Indeed, it moves almost breathlessly from one event to another, frequently punctuated by the word 'immediately'. To get an idea of the pace, consider what takes place in just the first chapter. It contains nothing about Jesus' birth or early life, but begins with his baptism by John the Baptist, at which time the Spirit descends upon Jesus accompanied by a voice from heaven saying "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) He then goes into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan, and the angels wait upon him. (1:12-13) When he returns, he goes to Galilee, "proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

(1:14-15) After calling four fishermen as his first disciples, saying he will make them “fishers of people” (1:17), he travels about performing miracles, healing many people, and casting out demons (1:21-45).

While miracles are presented in all of the Gospels, they are particularly prominent in Mark, with twenty such stories in its sixteen chapters, and together they make up a third of its content, and half of the content of the first ten chapters. Most of the miracles involve healing or casting out demons, though Jesus also restores to life a girl who has died (5:21-43), stills a storm (4:35-41), walks on water (6:45-52), and feeds crowds in the thousands with quantities of food more suitable for a family picnic (6:30-44, 8:1-10). Mark presents him as foretelling his death and resurrection not once, but three times, and the Gospel ends with his followers discovering his tomb empty and being told by an angel that he has been raised (16:6). (Mark 16 also contains an appearance of the resurrected Jesus, but this part of the chapter is not found in the oldest existing manuscripts.) Together, these stories present Jesus as having authority over the natural world, including human disease, over angels and demons, and even over death.

It is, all in all, an astonishing story. Indeed, Mark repeatedly tells us that the people who were present were astonished both by Jesus’ miracles and by what he taught. The people who encounter Jesus in Mark’s Gospel react much as you or I would react if we witnessed such events: they are amazed and perplexed. And unlike the other Gospel writers, Mark supplies little in the way of explanation or commentary. Even Jesus’ disciples are presented as not understanding what they were seeing. It would be little exaggeration to say that the basic template of a story

in Mark goes something like this: “Jesus did this amazing thing...and his disciples didn’t get it.” The New Testament scholar Howard Clark Kee has suggested that the point of this is that no one *could* understand the true significance of Jesus except in light of the resurrection and the experience of the Church, which of course had not yet happened during Jesus’ earthly ministry.

I also tend to think that this aspect of Mark’s Gospel also speaks to its authenticity. The exact date of its composition is a matter of debate, but it was assuredly written at a time when some of Jesus’ original disciples were still alive and were important and influential people in the Christian community. It would have been natural for a writer in this community to have presented them as exemplary in every way – as the chosen and enlightened few who saw Jesus for who he was. But this is not what we find in the text. They are clearly *committed* to Jesus, but they plainly understand him little better than anyone else. Even when Peter says that Jesus is the Christ (the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah), Mark makes it clear that Jesus is not what people *expected* the Messiah to be – a political leader who would expel the Romans and restore the Jewish kingdom – but that he must suffer, die, and be raised up, and that anyone who wishes to follow him must be willing to do the same. (Mark 8)

Much of Jesus’ teaching in Mark and the other synoptic Gospels comes in the form of parables with hidden meaning. The Parable of the Sower in chapter 4 provides a good example, as it contains both the public version of the parable and Jesus’ private explanation to his disciples:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have

much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

‘they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
and may indeed listen, but not understand;  
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’"

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. (Mark 4:3-20)

If the disciples did not fully understand what Jesus was teaching even after hearing the private explanation given in the last paragraph of the quote, we might well sympathize, because it leaves a great deal unanswered. Saying that the "seeds" in the story represent "the word" does not help us understand the parable unless we also understand what "the word" is supposed to be. (Perhaps it is Jesus own words? Or perhaps it is "the word of the Lord", which can mean the Bible itself, but also is used in the Hebrew scriptures for prophetic inspiration? John's Gospel calls Jesus himself "the Word", but this does not occur in Mark.)

But upon reflection, if it is difficult to discern the meaning of the parable, this is consonant with the message we find in the parable itself: if Jesus' own words are

seeds from which the Kingdom of God can grow in a person, we should not expect to fully understand them until we see what they grow into, any more than we can know what a plant will look like just by looking at its seeds. The depiction of the disciples in Mark might indeed stand as a model for Christian experience: in Jesus we encounter someone altogether remarkable, who shows us something so far beyond our ordinary experience that it leaves us deeply moved, but as yet uncomprehending. Like the disciples, we might be motivated to follow him, and to believe that “the kingdom of God is at hand” and to “repent and believe in the Good News” (1:15), but we come to understand what this means only gradually, as the seeds of the kingdom grow within us.

### **The Gospels of Matthew and Luke**

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke include many of the same stories found in Mark – a bit less than half of each of them is similar or identical to passages found in Mark’s Gospel. The material that goes beyond Mark includes additional parables, longer discourses such as the Sermon on the Mount, accounts of Jesus’ birth and genealogy, and distinctive interpretations of who Jesus was and what he was doing.

The best-known of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew come from the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with a section known as the Beatitudes. (From the Latin word for “blessed”.)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:  
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”  
(Matthew 5:1-11)

In this short passage we see a profound transfiguration of values. The conventional wisdom was that riches, health, success, and social status were the things we should desire and also signs of God's favor, and their opposites were personal calamities that were often assumed to be consequences of sins a person had committed. Jesus, by contrast, recognizes that troubles and persecutions are not only a part of human life, but sometimes come specifically as a consequence of righteousness. (Many of the Old Testament prophets, after all, had been killed for their challenging and unpopular messages.) Moreover, the brokenness we feel in the midst of experiences such as mourning and rejection are in fact blessings can that bring us closer to God. Luke's version of the sermon goes even further, adding warnings about the spiritual perils of good fortune:

But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.  
Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.  
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:24-26)



But unlike a revolutionary leader trying to stir up the poor and oppressed against the rich and powerful, Jesus adds an admonition to love one's enemies:

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Judging Others

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:27-38)

This sort of moral teaching, which turns upside-down our conventional assumptions about what is truly a blessing to be sought after, is also clearly consonant with how Jesus' own life is presented in the Gospels. Mark presents Jesus as a "suffering servant". Matthew presents Jesus as the true King of the Jews, who proclaims the Kingdom of God. But Jesus shows us that true kingship does not consist in military victories and authoritarian rule, but in caring for the people and leading them into righteousness. In the words of John's Gospel, Jesus is the "good shepherd" of humanity, who not only leads and watches over people, but is willing to lay down his life for them. (John 10:11)

This juxtaposition of Jesus' divine authority with our common understandings of earthly authority, and even with the prevailing Jewish conceptions of God's relation to humanity, are major themes of both Matthew and

Luke. Matthew's Gospel seems to have been written primarily for a Jewish audience, linking events in Jesus' life to the messianic prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures and linking Jesus thematically to Moses (the prophet God used to lead Israel out of Egypt) and by lineage to David (the King who established Israel as a nation, and whom Matthew's genealogy of Jesus identifies as Jesus' ancestor, placing Jesus in the royal lineage). Matthew suggests that the Jews of Jesus' day were right to look for a Messiah who would be both a king descended from David and a prophetic deliverer like Moses. But they deeply misunderstood what such a royal deliverer would be like. As Jesus says to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in John's Gospel, his kingdom is "not of this world" (John 18:36) – his goal is not to evict the Romans in order to become the potentate of Judea and enforce the Jewish Law there, but to draw Israel and all the rest of humanity into a radical and direct relationship with God that eclipses ethnic and political identity. God had indeed formed a special covenant with Israel, but this was only a part of a larger plan to draw all of humanity to himself.

Luke's Gospel seems to have been written more for a gentile audience throughout the Roman Empire. In it, Jesus sets his teachings in opposition to what "the world" esteems. On the one hand, this includes a disavowal of conventional values like fulfilling one's appetites (Luke 12:29-30) and shrewd financial dealings (Luke 16:8). It is also in Luke's Gospel that we see most clearly that Jesus' ministry includes – perhaps even emphasizes – people that a Jewish teacher of the day would not normally seek out or fraternize with: the poor, women (who would not normally be present at a rabbi's teaching), tax collectors, "sinners" (in the sense of people

living openly immoral lives such as prostitutes), and even foreigners such as Samaritans and gentiles (whom observant Jews would have avoided contact with as much as possible). Jesus came to “seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10)

On the other hand, it also reflects a view that the rulers of the present age have their authority from Satan. Jesus will indeed return in power on some future date, and the kingdoms of the world will be thrown down when he returns; but the task of his followers is not to raise up an army or try to build a heavenly kingdom for themselves, but to watch for that day and guard their own souls in the meantime. (Luke 21:25-26) In Luke’s Gospel, we see a deep sense of the fallenness of the world: not only are individuals fallen (or in the words of Luke 19:10, “lost”), the values of the age (including those of the religious leaders) are fundamentally distorted, and the political structures of the world are the dominion of the devil. Jesus’ resurrection opens the door to the salvation and transformation of individuals who receive him, but the transformation of the world will come about only when he returns in glory.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke also continues the narrative beyond Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances into a history of the early Church in the Book of Acts. As previously noted, the most important events in Acts include Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the conferral of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost, which empowers them to preach the Good News accompanied by miracles and prophetic powers, and the inclusion of gentiles in the Christian community. These latter two themes unite both books: Jesus’ ministry begins when the Holy Spirit descends upon him at his baptism, and the ministry of the apostles

begins when they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches and works miracles among gentiles as well as Jews in the Gospel; in Acts God reveals in a vision that the Good News is to be preached to them as well, and when the first gentile converts receive it, they are filled with the Holy Spirit even before they are baptized. In Luke, it becomes clear that God offers salvation to the entire world through Jesus; in Acts, we see how he enlightens, transforms, and empowers those who receive him through the Holy Spirit. Matthew's Gospel ends with the Great Commission, in which the risen Christ sends his disciples out as apostles

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Luke's version is found, not in his Gospel, but in the Book of Acts.

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:4-8)

In it, we see several themes of Luke's Gospel gathered together. The Great Commission is not so much the end of the story of Jesus' presence on Earth as the beginning of a new story of the Church proclaiming the Good News. This takes place through the power of the Holy Spirit, and is something distinct from the cosmic change Jesus will bring about when he returns. Even Jesus' closest followers are not

given knowledge of how or when the latter will come about; their task is to proclaim the Good News as his witnesses.

### **John's Gospel**

John's Gospel is notably different from the synoptics. There are some events that are reported in all four Gospels, but John does something that the other Gospel writers do not do. He does not confine himself to narrating the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but places these in a much broader context. It begins with a narrative that tells a cosmic story about who Jesus was and is – one that goes well beyond human biography.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

In this remarkable Prologue to John's Gospel, Jesus is identified with the "Word of God" through whom God created all things. This directly links the Prologue to John's Gospel with Genesis 1, in which God calls things into being through acts of divine speech. ("Let there be....") If Mark's gospel reads a bit like a mystery story in which we are left to wonder with Jesus' contemporaries what sort of man he might be, the beginning of John's gospel reads like a re-interpretation of the story of creation itself with Jesus at the center of it. This man Jesus, whom "we" (presumably the author and the other original Christians) have beheld in person, was not *just* a man. Rather, he was (and is) the Word through which the universe came into being. More than this, he *was* (and *is*) God, and also God's only-begotten son. John brings front and center the aspect of Jesus that the Jewish religious leaders understandably found to be disturbing: his claims to be God, and the son of God. If the synoptic Gospels are biographical, John's is theological through and through. Where Mark leaves the reader wondering what to think of this man, John tells us what to think in no uncertain terms: he was not *merely* a man at all, but was God made flesh, and you can either reject him (as did so many), or you can receive him, and with that receive the power to become "children of God".

If John's Gospel emphasizes the divinity of Jesus as the Word of God who was with the Father from before creation and came down into the world, it also contributes something distinctive about what that means for us. As in the other Gospels, Jesus did come to forgive sins and will come again to transform the world – indeed, it is John who describes Jesus as the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29) – but that is not the entire story. It is not merely that our sins

are forgiven and that we can look forward to a better world when Jesus comes again. Being saved also involves a change in our own status – being adopted as God’s sons and daughters. The idea of being “born again”, introduced in chapter 3 of the Gospel, is not simply a metaphor for getting a new start with a clean slate, but really is the beginning of something truly new, a life in which our nature is radically transformed, even if the full implications of this are not yet apparent. This theme is also taken up in the first of the letters that bear John’s name:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)

Like the parable of the Sower, the image of being adopted or reborn as God’s children suggests a kind of inner transformation which is cosmic in its scope but best understood through organic metaphors. Having become children of God, we are no longer *of* this world, even though we are still *in* it. (John 15:19, 17:16) We are only sojourners here, but our citizenship is in heaven. (Compare Philippians 3:20.)

John also stresses that this transformation takes place through belief in Jesus. As he sums it up in what is perhaps the most widely-cited verse of the Gospel, “For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) And in other passages in John, Jesus also expresses the crucial importance of belief in him. (Cf. John 8:24, 11:27, 14:1, 20:28-31)

John's Gospel also provides us with a number of memorable statements from Jesus himself concerning who he is, sometimes collectively called the "seven 'I am' statements":

*The bread of life:* "And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'" (John 6:35).

*The light of the world:* "Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, 'I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'" (John 8:12).

*The gate to the sheepfold (of salvation):* "I am the gate. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:9).

*The good shepherd:* "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." (John 10:11).

*The resurrection and the life:* Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live." (John 11:25).

*The way, the truth, and the life:* Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14:6).

*The true vine:* "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." (John 15:1).

The image of the good shepherd fits well with the themes already discussed in Matthew and Luke: Jesus indeed has authority over the world, as a shepherd has authority over his flock, but like a *good* shepherd, he uses it to protect and guide those under his care, even giving his life for them. Moreover, it is in being a part of his flock that we are saved – Jesus is like the gate of the sheep pen which protects the sheep from wolves, and is indeed the *only* gate, the only way to salvation. Here John makes it quite clear that Jesus' role is *unique*, an insight that is only heightened in the other sayings. Jesus is not only a teacher whose instruction can produce enlightenment, he is himself *the light of the world*. As John tells us in the prologue to



the Gospel, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Not only was he resurrected, he *is* the resurrection and the life, and through belief in him, we can gain eternal life beyond our bodily death. Not only did he teach saving truth and show us the way, he *is* the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to the Father.

The remaining two sayings require at least brief commentary. The image of Jesus as the true vine comes in the context of a longer [parable], in which Jesus’ followers are likened to branches of the vine. The point of the analogy is that the branches of a vine do not have life in themselves, but receive their life and sustenance only by being connected to the vine. I shall return to this image in the chapter on sanctification, but there is a clear implication about the nature of salvation as well: the true life that is gained in being saved comes “through Jesus” not only in the sense that Jesus *announced* the possibility of salvation, or even that he opened the gates of salvation that we might enter them. Rather, salvation comes “through” Jesus in the sense of being in relationship with him, the way the branches of a vine receive their life-giving nourishment *through* the vine. Moreover, while the branches of a vine are in one sense distinct from the main stem of the vine – they can be cut off or grafted on, as the parable emphasizes – in another sense they form a single organic unity. Indeed, when a vinegrower grafts sprigs from one vine onto the stem of another, and they become one plant, their very nature is changed at the level of their DNA. As I shall discuss in the chapter on sanctification, I find this a powerful metaphor: salvation involves a relationship with God in Jesus so intimate that it changes our very nature, so that we take on something of the nature of Christ.

The metaphor of Jesus being the bread of life also involves life-giving nourishment. But it also suggests more. The food we eat becomes a part of ourselves. As St. Paul puts it, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Galations 2:20) Christians have also associated this saying with Jesus’ words at the last supper, when he broke bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19, compare Matthew 26:26) Christians regularly share bread and wine in observance of this commandment, regarding it as an outward sign of their participation in Jesus death, in which he gave his body and blood for the salvation of the world. I shall return to this practice and the ways Christians understand it in Chapter [8].

While the image of the Good Shepherd makes sense applied to the character of Jesus the man, the ideas that Jesus is also the giver of light and life – both in the ordinary sense of being instrumental in the creation of the natural world and in the spiritual sense of being the source of enlightened spiritual life – make sense only with the understanding that Jesus is also (indeed, *preeminently*) divine and that salvation involves the conferral of the light and life that is in Jesus upon our mortal natures as well. “Receiving Jesus” requires belief, but it is not simply a matter of intellectual assent. It involves *receiving something of Jesus’ divine presence into one’s being*, and thereby being transformed into a different sort of being.

## What Christians Believe About Salvation

Reading my brief characterizations of how Jesus is presented in the four Gospels is, of course, no substitute for reading the Gospels themselves. Indeed, if you want to understand Jesus more deeply, you might do well to put this book down for now and read the Gospels instead. That will give you an experience much closer to a personal encounter with Jesus, whereas my approach has been to try to distill some of the important themes found in the texts themselves. When you do so, you will probably experience for yourself something that I have attempted to convey: that having *four* accounts of the life of Jesus provides us with a richer picture of him than we could get from any one of them alone, much as we would get a richer picture of anyone by hearing about them from a number of people who had first- or second-hand acquaintance with them. Many of the stories one writer presents are included by other writers as well, but each of the Gospel writers also presents a unique perspective on who Jesus was. And this is only to be expected. If four of your friends each wrote a book about you, you would not expect them to be exactly alike, either in which episodes of your life they recounted or in which aspects of it they emphasized. Someone who read just one of them might get a different sense of you than someone who read another. And yet if you were to read them all yourself, you might recognize different sides of your life faithfully represented in each, even though they were very different. This is simply what happens when you try to convey something as complicated as a person in the low bandwidth of a story, and it is bound to be even more pronounced when they are stories about a person so

remarkable as Jesus, especially if, as Christians believe, he was divine as well as human.

There are, of course, some things that are common to all four portrayals of Jesus: He was a real human being – something that no serious scholar I know of would dispute – who had a relatively brief but remarkable career as an itinerant teacher who drew large crowds and also had a smaller group of disciples who travelled with him over the space of three years. According to all the Gospel accounts, he worked miracles, ranging from healing the sick to casting out demons to restoring the dead to life. He had life-changing encounters with people from all walks of life and offered deeply humane teachings that challenged the established order and called people to a radical change of heart and of life, variously described as repentance, the Good News, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, being born again, and becoming children of God. He spoke with authority about God, and said and did things that implied that he was himself divine – from forgiving sins (something Jews understood that only God could do) to referring to God as his father, to speaking of himself using a variant of the name God had used in speaking to Moses, “I am”. The religious establishment came to hate him, and brought him up on trial before the Roman authorities, who crucified him. He truly died; but on the third day the tomb was found empty, and he subsequently appeared to his disciples. Some of the Gospels tell us additionally (and it is implied in the other Gospels by the very fact that they were written at all) that he sent out his disciples – now called apostles – to continue preaching the Good News in light of his resurrection, and promised that he would return some day to transform and rule the world.

Collectively, the Gospels also present other claims about Jesus. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is that he was not merely a man, but also God. On the one hand, this claim gives authority to his words beyond the authority of any merely human speech. On the other hand, it explains his miracles and his resurrection. And in the process it gives us a radically new understanding of who God is and what God wants. The same God who created the world and spoke from a cloud to Moses also cares so much for human beings that he came down to live as one of us, even being willing to suffer and die at our hands, in order to seek and save the lost, to forgive sins, and to give new and everlasting life to all who believe and are willing to receive him. In Jesus we find that God is not only a transcendent being beyond the created universe and a stern lawgiver, but also a good shepherd and a physician of souls. He is not unmoved by our hardships, because he shared in them and “bore our grief and carried our sorrows.” (Isaiah 53:4) He understands the burden of guilt and slavery to sin that we bear and came to take them away. He is acquainted with the sting of death, and in rising from the dead won for us everlasting life. He understands our separation from God, came to live as God with us, and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

What is it that Christians believe that Christ came to do? We may separate this into three answers: about what is already accomplished, what is ongoing, and what is yet to come. First, Christians believe that Jesus opened the gates to salvation from sin and death through his own death and resurrection. This was accomplished once and for all upon the cross. In theological terms, this is referred to as “atonement”. In Christ’s death and resurrection, God offers forgiveness of sins, new

life in a renewed relationship with God, and eternal life beyond the death of the body as a free gift to all who will simply receive it. But a new life in relationship with God and the prospect of being brought back to life in Christ's kingdom are not about the past: they are about *ongoing* life, and life that will take on a new form when Christ returns. The new life is one in which we are filled with the Holy Spirit, which transforms us gradually into the image and likeness of Christ, making our nature like his. In this new life we grow in virtue, knowledge, and love – a process referred to as *sanctification*. And with this new life comes a new task: to share the Good News with others, so that they too might believe and be saved and become adopted into the family of God's sons and daughters. The ongoing process is one in which we gradually and continually progress as individuals, and it is lived in community with other believers, constantly inviting others to join in the new life we have received. We do so, however, in the midst of a still-fallen world. But this, too, Christ promises to change when he comes again, overthrowing the evil powers that corrupt God's children, and himself reigning over a recreated heaven and earth.

The word 'salvation' is used by Christians in both a broader and a narrower sense. In its broad sense, it encompasses all that we have just described: the saving act of atonement and its acceptance as a free gift, the ongoing process of sanctification, and the culmination of history in a recreated heaven and earth. But it is also used in a narrower sense, in which it refers more specifically to the atonement won on the cross and our acceptance of Christ as savior. I shall say nothing about the future resurrection of the dead or what happens after we die. The Bible is clear enough *that*, although we will experience bodily death, this is not the

end, and we shall live forever with Christ. But the details of this, however much we might like to know them, have not been supplied, and I shall not speculate upon them. The idea of sanctification I shall discuss in the next chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall discuss various views that Christians have taken about the nature of the atonement.

## **Theories of Atonement**

In the last chapter I presented, in terms of personal experience, the idea that God wishes to forgive our sins, deliver us from the prospect of death, and free us from the bonds of our fallen nature to live new lives in union with him. Thus far, this chapter has looked at how Jesus is presented in the Gospels and given a brief summary of how Christians believe that Jesus is central to this plan of salvation. But the reader may well feel – as many generations of Christian thinkers have felt before – that there is still a need to connect the dots by explaining *how* Jesus fits into God's plan of salvation. *Why* did God do such a thing as take on a human nature and live among us, submitting himself to all of the difficulties of human life, even allowing himself to be put to a painful death on a cross? Surely God could have more easily – and perhaps more effectively – announced the Good News in a voice from a cloud, or revealed it through prophets?

To this, I think, there are three responses. One is the response we must always be careful to include in any assessment of claims about God: that we are not

fully in a position to assess God's reasons or methods. But we should also remember that, in the Hebrew scriptures, God *is* presented, again and again, as reaching out to human beings to restore relationship. God *did* speak from a cloud to Moses, and did send prophets to call people back into right relationship with him. But it wasn't enough. Even the Israelites, the people specially chosen and instructed by God, proved to be a "stiff-necked people", repeatedly forsaking God. Perhaps, in order to give the message the best chance of being heard, God had to act directly, and in a form that people could see, hear, and even touch. The gospel message certainly *did* reach many more people than the Law of Moses or the words of the prophets – perhaps some two billion living in the world today. Most of the people who have believed the Good News did not know Jesus in the flesh, but nonetheless there is something about the testimony of those who did know him that has spread the message around the world. Jesus' proclamation of the Good News has become the Church's proclamation. And it seems plausible that there are things that people could understand about God only if they encountered God, not as a transcendent creator outside the universe, or even as a lawgiver acting in human history, but in a form they could better comprehend, in which the ineffable divine love was made visible and tangible in human form. Indeed, if it is an essential part of the saving message that God so loves the world that he was willing to suffer and die so that we might be saved, how could this be conveyed except through living a human life and dying a human death? For Christians, the cross and the empty tomb are the key events in salvation history, and it is only in them that we are fully confronted with the power and the depth of God's love for us.



But this brings us to a third point. The cross and resurrection do indeed *show* us something about God's saving love for the world. But most Christians have also believed something more: that they do not merely *convey* something deeply important about God's saving love, but also played a crucial role in *making salvation possible*. God's love and his desire to draw all people to himself were surely there all along, even before the creation of the world and its creatures. God is "the same, yesterday, today, and forever." (Hebrews 13:8) But Christians believe that God's desire to save us is *fulfilled* only in Jesus' death and resurrection. But herein lies a great mystery: just *how* do the death and resurrection of Jesus make salvation possible in ways it would not be possible without them? Christians have approached this question in several ways. These include two types of themes. One, which has already been broached, is that the cross and resurrection *show* us something about God that we could not otherwise have appreciated, and provoke us to respond to in a unique way: it is only in beholding the cross and the empty tomb that we understand and accept the salvation that God has always desired for us. The other theme is that Christ's death and resurrection brought about a kind of cosmic change in their own right, independently of how anyone might respond to them: that Jesus' death took away our sins and tore down the barriers separating God and humanity, and that in rising again he destroyed the bonds of death. The ideas Christians have posed about this make up what theologians call "theories of the atonement."

To address these questions, it is necessary to do something that I have tried to avoid whenever possible, and that is to talk about *theories*. And before I do so,

perhaps I should clarify my reasons for being reticent to talk about theological theories. Two of these are fairly straightforward. First, the main purpose of this book is to present a general picture of what Christians believe. But when we turn to theological theories, we are no longer talking about what Christians believe in common, but about things that different Christians and Christian traditions have understood in different ways. Christians believe that we are offered salvation through Christ, and that, being saved, we begin a new life in Christ. But when pressed to spell out the “through” and the “in” more carefully, Christians have come up with some very different answers. They need not all be mutually contradictory answers – indeed, I think that *in their proper place and understood in the proper ways* they can be complementary and mutually illuminating.

The second of the straightforward reasons is that I am not a theologian, and these are theories that have been developed in careful ways and over many centuries by very bright and thoughtful people who are. As an educated and informed Christian, I consider myself competent to present the major Christian beliefs to other non-theologians. But academic theology is not something I feel competent to debate, because it requires a great deal of specialized knowledge and expertise that take years to acquire. Precisely because I have a similar sort of knowledge and expertise in *other* subjects, I am keenly aware of my limitations as a non-expert in *this* one. At most, I can give pointers to some of the major ideas that have been examined by others in much greater detail.

A third reason is one that I have stressed several times already. Being a Christian does not *require* an understanding of academic theology. Most of Jesus’

disciples were not highly-educated people, and it is by no means clear that the holiest Christians through the ages have been the most theologically-educated or vice-versa. There is certainly nothing wrong with wanting to understand one's faith better. It is both a natural and a good thing. But for some there is a real danger that the truly important goals of knowing, loving, and following Jesus can be sidetracked by exercises in purely intellectual curiosity. Knowing what theologians say *about* Jesus is not the same thing as knowing Jesus himself. It is one thing if your desire is to be saved and made holy, and you find that exploring theological questions helps you in pursuing that goal. It is quite another if what you really want is to figure out the answer to intellectual puzzles about theology, and substitute that for a relationship with God in Christ. Doing that can be as much a barrier to spiritual life as it would be if you approached marriage primarily in order to come up with a theory *about* marriage. Christianity, like marriage, is fundamentally a relationship to be *lived* rather than studied. If the studying interferes with the living, one would do well to forego the study.

But what is for me the deepest misgiving is that I tend to be pessimistic about our ability to understand God or his actions in a fully satisfactory way through human understanding. As a professional philosopher, I actually think a great deal about theories – not only about particular theories on various topics, but also about the nature and limitations of human understanding, including theoretical understanding. Even with earthly matters, I am of the opinion that our understanding is partial and incomplete, and that attaining the best understanding we can often involves piecing together ideas taken from a number of viewpoints

which are often difficult to fit together into a single theory. When we try to understand God, it is even worse. Our minds are too small to encompass God as he really is. To the extent that we can have some halting understanding of him, it is largely through taking human and earthly matters that we understand better and applying them to God: God made the universe (somewhat, but not entirely, the way we make things); God is like a king, a father, a shepherd; Jesus is a rescuer, a king, a priest, a sacrificial lamb. Such language is sanctioned by the Bible, and Christians take it to express important truths about God as best we can understand him. We *need* such figurative understanding to have any grasp of God at all. But we are likely to fall into error if we assume that, even through the Biblical images, we understand God *fully* or *exactly*, and the more so if we try to do so through any *one* of them alone. The Bible presents any number of ways of understanding God, Jesus, and the work of salvation. This can be puzzling because they do not all fit together well. (How can Jesus be both the sacrificial lamb and the priest who sacrifices it?) In my view, the proper way to look at this is that each of the Biblical metaphors expresses something true and edifying if understood rightly, but that each provides only a partial and imperfect glimpse into God's nature and the divine plan. As a consequence, we are very limited in our ability to reason about them *together* in an attempt to assemble an exact and comprehensive understanding of God and his works. That, however, is often what scholars do when they attempt to provide theological theories. I am sure that experienced Biblical scholars and theologians themselves understand the limitations of such theories quite well. Ultimately, a lifetime of scholarship – theological or otherwise – teaches us intellectual humility.

But along the way to this humility, there is a temptation to think that, if only I understand this theory, it will all be clear to me, and I will understand it all. But this is not what we should expect in this life. As St. Paul writes, “Now we see as in a glass, dimly; but then [in the life to come] we shall see face to face.” (Romans 13:12)

With these cautions in mind, I shall now describe five influential theories of atonement. Each of them can draw support from Biblical texts and has had a substantial number of supporters. If the reader finds one or more of them edifying, that is well and good. If not, no matter – neither salvation nor the new life in Christ depends upon understanding or accepting them.

### **The Lamb of God: A Sacrifice for Sin**

One of the ways Jesus’ death is interpreted within the Bible itself is in terms of the practice of animal sacrifice that was carried out at the Jewish Temple in accordance with the Law of Moses. In addition to a set of rules for how to live, the Law also prescribed the steps to take when a person had sinned in order that the sins might be forgiven. These involved the sacrifice of young sheep or goats upon the altar. Lambs were also sacrificed when God sent plagues upon the Egyptians in preparation to lead Israel out of slavery. The Book of Exodus tells us that, on the night that he led them out, he instructed each Hebrew household to slaughter a yearling lamb and spatter its blood on the doorpost so that the angel of death would pass over the houses that had been thus marked and not kill the Hebrews. This event is still observed each year by Jews around the world at the feast of Passover.

The slaughter of lambs was thus already rich in associations for Jews of Jesus' day. And throughout the New Testament, Jesus is repeatedly described in terms that evoke the image of the sacrificial lamb. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus is baptized, John the Baptist proclaims "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." (John 1:29) And Jesus is crucified at the beginning of the feast of Passover, when the Passover lambs would have been slaughtered. Christians have seen in this a deep symbolism: that Jesus' death is instrumental in the forgiveness of sins and in a release from bondage and death into a new life in covenant with God. Indeed, Christians believe that the full meaning of the Passover and of the sacrificial lamb can be understood only in light of Jesus' death. It is Christ's death that provides true forgiveness and deliverance. The sacrifice of actual lambs may indeed have accomplished something before that, but it was an imperfect foreshadowing of the one great act of redemption that would be accomplished on the cross. And once this perfect act had been completed, there was no longer any need for further animal sacrifice.

It would be easy and convenient to stop here and say that the connection between Jesus and the sacrificial lamb was simply that it provided a way for the original Jewish hearers to understand Jesus' saving act and its implications – forgiveness of sin, deliverance from death and bondage – in terms already deeply familiar to them, the sacrifice of animals. Indeed, if one wished to avoid the uncomfortable implications of blood sacrifice which are likely to make a modern person's skin crawl, one might go further and speculate that the original institution of animal sacrifice might itself have been an accommodation to the expectations of

people living in a largely pagan world where animal sacrifice was common. (And indeed, Leviticus 17:7 forbids people to sacrifice animals on their own without bringing them to the Lord's altar, characterizing it as sacrifices for demons.)

Unfortunately, it is not quite so simple and antiseptic. Leviticus 17:11 says

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.

The immediate context of the verse is the prohibition against *eating* blood (the only dietary law that was retained by early Christians (Acts 15:29)), but it is difficult to escape the implication that there is something special about blood that makes it fit for atonement. And this theme is central to the interpretation of redemption we find in the New Testament Book of Hebrews, which characterizes Christ's death in the imagery of Temple sacrifice:

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9:11-21)

It is thus common for Christians to speak of having been saved by *the blood* of Jesus. But if we try to press much beyond this, we tread on uncertain ground. On the one hand, if we try to scour away the blood and sacrifice, as though they were merely ugly reminders of a more savage age, we risk denying something that is important enough that it is found throughout the scriptures. It is hard to make much sense of it, but there is no denying that it is there. On the other hand, if we make it into a theory that blood has some special powers in its own right to take away sin, we risk mistaking the mystery of redemption for some sort of magic, as though forgiveness of sin can be assured simply by putting the right things (blood) in the right place (the altar). But this gets it backwards: forgiveness of sins is something God does, not human beings. And if the Temple sacrifices brought about forgiveness of sins, it was because it was the ritual God had established for people seeking forgiveness. (Indeed, the prohibition on private sacrifice in Leviticus 17:11 should make it clear that sacrificing a lamb is not a kind of magical get-out-of-jail-free card.)

### **Substitutionary Atonement**

A second and related theory of the atonement is that Jesus died *in place of us*. This is generally referred to as “substitutionary atonement”. The underlying logic is legal in character: Sin – transgression of God’s Law – bears a penalty, and that penalty is death. Christians have often seen St. Paul as expressing this view in his letter to the Romans when he says “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus our Lord”. (Romans 6:23) On the substitutionary view,



everyone who has sinned either *deserves* to die or at least death is the natural and inexorable *consequence* of sinning. But it is possible, as it were, for Jesus, who was without sin, to take our place on the gallows and bear the penalty of death in our stead. We are then spared from (eternal) death and forgiven our sins because justice has been satisfied and the required price has been paid.

While the notion of blood sacrifice may be quite foreign to modern westerners, the notions of justice and deserved consequences are not. On the one hand, we find something amiss when criminals get away with their crimes without consequence. On the other hand, many people labor under a heavy burden of fear and guilt over things they have done, sometimes even feeling they deserve to die for them and perhaps thinking death preferable to an existence of shame and guilt. If you feel this way, you might not go so far as to wish for some innocent person to die in your place, but if you learned that they had already done so of their own free will, and were convinced that your guilt was indeed absolved in the process, you might well feel immense relief and gratitude. I am not talking here about some innocent person being wrongly convicted of your crime and unjustly punished for it. If I were to be punished for your crime, it would not truly take your guilt away, even if the human courts considered the case closed; and if you are even a minimally decent person, knowing I was unjustly punished for what you did would only add to the burden of guilt. But in this respect, Christ's substitutionary atonement is supposed to be crucially different, in that he took upon himself not only the *penalty* for our sins, but our sins themselves and the guilt that goes with them. It is little wonder that people whose souls are weighed down with guilt have often been moved to the

core of their being at the message that Christ died for them, and that as a result, their sins are forgiven.

There is, however, something deeply unsettling – perhaps even morally repugnant – about the other part of the substitutionary theory: the idea that the price of sin – *any* sin – is death. If we were to learn that some human society prescribed capital punishment for any infraction, however minor, we would likely conclude that this was the worst legal system we had ever encountered. And it seems glaringly at odds with the understanding of the God of the Bible we have explored in previous chapters. But remember that the idea that “the wages of sin is death” is only half of the story. The other half is that both pardon and eternal life are offered as a free gift to all who repent. If a justice whose universal penalty is death is extreme, a mercy that offers pardon and new life to all is equally extreme. And, even apart from the substitutionary theory’s view of what justice requires, if Chapter [5] is correct, this is a mercy for which anyone who is morally honest feels a need.

Moreover, while proponents of the substitutionary view have generally assumed that the relation between sin and death is one of crime and punishment, I am not convinced that this is the best interpretation. It may be true that “the wages of sin is death”, but *legal punishment* is not the only, or even the most natural, interpretation of ‘wages’ – wages are what our work has earned us, whether good or bad; and the word ‘sin’ in the Bible often refers, not to individual acts a person commits, but to the fallen condition of *sinfulness*. If the essence of this fallen condition is separation from God – Godlessness, in the sense of the absence of God

from one's life – and the true and everlasting life is possible only in communion with God, then mortality is in fact the natural consequence of fallenness, and indeed even while our bodies breathe, we are already spiritually dead if separated from God.

Seen this way, death is not so much a punishment for something we have done as the awful prognosis of our fallen condition, and the free gift of everlasting life is its welcome remedy. This, however, is not so much a variation upon the substitutionary theory – it is not clear where any “substitution” comes into it – as an alternative interpretation. The next two theories of atonement, while cast in different terms, are more consonant with it.

### **Christ the Redeemer**

One of the ways Christians describe Jesus is as their *redeemer*, and their salvation as *redemption*. But what is redemption? Some years ago, I was confused when I drove past a building whose sign read “Redemption Center.” At first, I thought it was an oddly-named church. But a closer look revealed that it was in fact a place for returning empty cans and bottles and collecting the deposits on them. We indeed speak of this as redeeming the bottles and cans for cash. And, as it turns out, it is not accidental that both are called “redemption”. The word has its origins in an ancient practice in which captives or slaves could be ransomed – “redeemed” – for a price. An army might capture a soldier from an opposing army and offer to return him for a monetary price. Insofar as we view ourselves as captives or slaves to sin, it is natural to ask *whose* captives or slaves we are. Some Christians came to

the view that, as sinners, we became slaves to the Devil. (Or, alternatively, that we were captives to sin and death, or a combination of all of the above.) Christ's death was then seen as a "redemption" in the old sense of the word: Christ bought our freedom by paying the price of suffering and dying on a cross.

This view is certainly suggested by the many appearances of the words 'redeem', 'redeemer', and 'redemption' in the Bible. It was articulated as an explicit theory of the atonement by a great Christian thinker named Origen, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the fourth century, and is the principal theory of atonement in the Eastern Orthodox churches. I find it particularly congenial because the metaphor of slavery accords well with the experience of moral helplessness that is part of the "bad news" I discussed in Chapter [5].

### **Recapitulation: Christ the Second Adam**

There are other views as well. Irenaeus, a second century Bishop of Lyons, who is one of the earliest Christian theologians whose works we have today, suggested that Jesus' work was primarily one of *recapitulating* the fall. What Adam and Eve did, in disobeying and hence being separated from God, was undone by Jesus, the "new Adam", who through his obedience to God opened the way for humans to be reconciled with God.

This view has its basis in Paul's letters, where he speaks of Jesus as "the last Adam" and "the new man", and contrasts Adam and his disobedience with Christ and his obedience to God the Father.

Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die,[m] but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15:45-57)

Here Paul also suggests a theme we saw earlier in John’s first letter: that Christ’s work is not only to free us from death, but to change our mortal nature into something like unto his own. And in his letter to the Romans, Paul characterizes Christ’s obedience to God as undoing the work of Adam’s disobedience and making us righteous.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

The point of the parallelism is, of course, clear enough: Jesus undid the effects of the fall attributed to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. But “recapitulation” does not so much mean “undoing” as “summing up”. A summary at the end of a book that brings it all together is called a recapitulation. In effect, Irenaeus suggests that Christ rewrote the cosmic story of humanity. Whereas Adam, through his disobedience,

was defeated by the devil and consigned his descendants to sin and death, Jesus, through his obedience unto death, defeated the devil and raised humanity up to new life in righteousness and communion with God. On this view, it was crucially important that Jesus was human as well as divine: his victory is also in some sense humanity's victory, and his life and righteousness can also be our life and righteousness.

He has therefore, in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things, both waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam ...the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of woman who conquered him. ... And therefore does the Lord profess Himself to be the Son of man, comprising in Himself that original man out of whom the woman was fashioned, in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.21.1 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds), *The Writings of Irenaeus* Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), p. 110-111)

Of the views of atonement we have surveyed, the recapitulation theory does the most to incorporate the theme that we have seen in the letters of both Paul and John that Christ's saving act also serves to transform our nature into something of Christ's own. As Irenaeus expressed it, Jesus "became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself". (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Preface to Book 5 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds), [\*The Writings of Irenaeus\*](#) Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), p. 55) In this respect, it also differs from the others in refusing to fully separate the themes of *atonement* (forgiveness of sin and reconciliation between God and humanity) and *sanctification* (being made holy and transformed into the image and likeness of God in Christ).

### **Christ as Moral Example**

Today, many Christians, particularly in liberal Protestant denominations, reject the idea that Christ's death was a payment for sin, and view his life and death rather as a kind of transforming moral example. Of course, Christians believe that Christ *was* our great moral example, and there is certainly Biblical basis for the idea that we should be imitators of Christ. Paul writes, for example, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (Romans 11:1) And it certainly makes a great deal of sense that followers of Jesus should try to follow his example, and indeed that it is only in the example of the perfect man, Jesus, that we discover how to live. How are we to know how to live a good and Godly life, unless we are able to see how such a life is lived? And how can that take place, given that our nature and desires are corrupted? Only if God himself takes on a human nature and lives a perfect human life, showing us the fullest expression of love in being willing to die for others. In hearing or reading about Christ, our own souls are moved to repentance and change of life, and we are able to be saved and sanctified.

The moral-example theory clearly has something right about it, so far as it goes. But, taken alone, it also leaves out much that is crucial to Christianity. If our nature is truly fallen and we are, as it were, slaves of sin in need of redemption and inward transformation, it is simply impossible to achieve the necessary changes for ourselves, even with a perfect role model to imitate. We need to be saved from our sinful nature, and to have that nature transformed into something of the image and likeness of God in Christ.

But there is something else that seems deeply right about the moral example view, or at least something close to it, and that is the idea that there are things we can understand about God and God's love for us only through the incarnate Christ. The one of these that seems most poignant to me is how to respond to the problem of evil in the world. It is natural, when we behold all of the evil in the world, to wonder why God allows it to happen, perhaps even to be angry with God for allowing it. There are purely *intellectual* approaches to the problem of evil – say, that evil is a consequence of the free will God gave us, and hence the responsibility for evil lies with us and not with God. But even if you think that such arguments succeed in showing that the goodness of God is compatible with the evil we find in the world, you may still not find them emotionally or morally satisfying. There is a story from the Holocaust in which the Gestapo hangs a young Jewish boy, and the rabbis in the camp put God on trial. Their conclusion is that God deserves to hang on that tree as well for allowing such things to happen. You may agree with their judgment, or you might think it the height of blasphemy. What has always struck me as remarkable, however, is that Christians believe *he did just that*. God came down and dwelt among us, sharing our afflictions and bearing humanity's sins by hanging on a wooden cross. I may not fully understand why God allows the degree of evil we see in the world, but *given that it exists*, there is something uniquely powerful about the idea that God's *response* to our suffering is to come down and share it alongside us. This reveals the depths of divine love in a way that one could never have anticipated so long as God was understood to exist "up there" in the heavens.



### **What To Make of Theories of Atonement?**

In my own view, each of these theologies of atonement and salvation rings true in its own way, and I tend not to think of them as rival views. Whatever the full truth about what God was doing in Christ, it is unlikely that our minds can fully grasp it. The best we can do is to approach it through the lenses of things that we understand better, and which are closer to our experience. There may be several perspectives that provide partial insight into what is ultimately a divine mystery, and to that extent, we might regard each of them as expressing a truth, even if it is only a partial truth, and one whose language can mislead if we try to press our understanding beyond its limits.

Moreover, for each of them, there are people who find them transforming and spiritually efficacious. Do you feel enslaved to sin and burdened by guilt? Then the sacrificial and substitutionary accounts may resonate with you. Christ *did* pay the price to set you free. Do you feel separated from God, disobedient, and see no way to turn around and make things right? No matter, Christ has already done this for you, recapitulating Adam's disobedience by His own perfect obedience. When you read about Jesus in the Gospels, do you feel your heart warmed and your spirit strangely moved towards a change of life? That is indeed the effect that an encounter with Jesus, God made flesh, that was felt by those who met him in the flesh as well, and God's Spirit stirs our hearts when we hear the stories they have set down for us.

## Chapter [7]

### What Must One Do To Be Saved?

In the last two chapters, we discussed what Christians believe about salvation: why we need to be saved and how salvation is offered as a free gift to all who will receive Jesus as their savior and lord. In later chapters, we will see how Christians believe that this is not the end but the beginning of a new and abundant life that will go on forever. But before we turn to that, there is an important question to be addressed. Indeed, from a practical standpoint, it is the most important question of all: that of what one must do in order to avail oneself of the offer of salvation. In the words repeated several times in the Bible, “What must I do to be saved?”

In one sense, there is nothing we must, or even *can*, do to secure salvation *for ourselves* – it is a free gift from God. But even a free gift must be *received* in order for us to have it as our own. If I receive a letter saying that I have received an inheritance or been offered a free gift, it does me little good unless it also provides instructions on how to obtain it. Even if I get a check in the mail, the money is not truly mine until I cash or deposit it, and I am free to tear it up, send it back, or just leave it on my desk. Similarly, salvation is a gift that a person needs to *receive* even though it has already been *offered*. As John’s Gospel puts it,

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But **to all who received him, who believed in his name**, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. [John 1:11-13, emphasis added]

Clearly, then, it is possible to “receive” Jesus or to not receive him. This verse from John links *receiving* Jesus to *believing in* him, and this idea is repeated a number of times in the New Testament. For example

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. **The one who believes and is baptized will be saved**; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. [Mark 16:15-16]

Very truly, I tell you, **anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life**, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. [John 5:24]

Then he [the jailor who had custody of Paul and Silas] brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “**Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**, you and your household.” [Acts 16:30-31]

Clearly, belief is an important part of salvation. But these passages are not about having the right beliefs *about* Jesus, but believing *in* him. If Christianity were a philosophy or ideology, all that would matter would be having the right beliefs *about* God, Jesus, sin, salvation, and the like. But Christianity is, first and foremost, a matter of being in a living and saving relationship with God through Jesus. It may be difficult or even impossible to do this without having certain beliefs *about* God and Jesus. But having beliefs about them – even the beliefs that are shared by Christians – is not enough. This point is made in a striking way in the Letter of James: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.” [James 2:19] Indeed, in the Gospels, the demons Jesus casts out recognize who he is long before even his disciples do. It is likewise possible for people to believe in God,

and even to believe that Jesus opened the doors of salvation, and still not *act* on those beliefs to *receive* the gift of salvation by accepting Jesus as their savior and lord. It might be because they realize that doing so will mean giving up some sin they are deeply attached to, or out of the dizzying implications of giving up one's claim to be master of one's own life and turning that title over to God. It may be that the purely intellectual recognition is not accompanied by a longing for God and salvation. Or, as seems to be the case in a number of New Testament stories, it may be that they long for it but do not know what to do next. For example, after Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, in which he explained who Jesus was and described his death and resurrection, those who heard him "were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'" [Acts 2:37] In response, Peter tells them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." [Acts 2:38-39]

The hearers apparently already *believed* what Peter had told them, and it was because of this that they asked him what they must do next. Peter told them to do two additional things: to *repent* and to *be baptized*. These three things – believing in Jesus, repentance, and baptism – are each mentioned numerous times in the New Testament, in different combinations, as the components of receiving salvation and new life in Christ. [references] So let us consider each of them in turn.

## Believing in Jesus

What does it mean to “believe in Jesus”? There is more than one thing we might mean when we say we “believe in” someone. Sometimes, we mean that we believe *that* they are *real* and not fictitious or imaginary. When I was a young child I believed in Santa Claus, but this belief was shattered one day when I was five or six years old and one of my classmates told me that Santa is “made up” and that it was really my parents who put presents under the tree after I had gone to bed on Christmas Eve. I no longer believe in Santa – that is, I do not believe that he is a real person. When atheists say they do not believe in God, they mean something similar to what I mean when I say I do not believe in Santa: they do not believe that there really is a God, and that the stories religious folk believe about God are fictions or myths.

But almost no one believes that *Jesus* was an historical fiction. Atheists and other non-Christians may believe that he was just a human teacher and not God incarnate. They may think that the Biblical stories of his miracles, virgin birth, and resurrection are fictitious. But even most atheists and members of other religions believe that he was a real person – and so, in one sense, they “believe in” him in a way that they also “believe in” Julius Caesar or Abraham Lincoln but do not “believe in” Santa. If atheists, Muslims, and Buddhists can acknowledge the historical Jesus in this way, this cannot be what Christians mean when they say that they “believe in Jesus” and hope that others will come to believe in him as well. And when Jesus exhorted people who were standing right in front of him to believe in him, his intent

was surely not to persuade them that he was a real person. The people he was talking to were in no danger of mistaking him for an illusion or a fictional character. They knew they were talking to a real flesh and blood person.

Of course, part of what distinguishes Christian belief from the way atheists, Muslims or Buddhists might “believe in” Jesus is in *what* they believe *about* him. Many atheists believe that Jesus was a good man and a fine moral teacher, but do not believe that he was God or that he rose from the dead. Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, though they have their own alternative story about his life and regard as blasphemy the Christian claim that he was also God. Many Buddhists believe that Jesus was an enlightened being like Buddha. Some people in Jesus’ day probably believed in the miracle stories but assumed that Jesus was some kind of magician. Christians, by contrast, believe that Jesus was indeed a man, but that he was also something no other human being ever was or will be: namely, God incarnate. And they believe that he died and rose again to save us from our sins and give us everlasting life. Previous chapters in this book have largely been about what we might call the distinctive Christian “beliefs-*about*” or “beliefs-*that*”: that Jesus was divine, that he rose from the dead, and so on.

But believing-*in* a person is not the same thing as having beliefs *about* the person. A person could believe *that* all the distinctively Christian beliefs are true and still not be a Christian if she does not act upon them by *accepting* the free gift of salvation and new life. And if she does not do so, she does not “believe in” Jesus in the sense that I think he intended when he said “believe in me”. When we say we “believe in” particular people, we usually don’t mean that we believe that, unlike

Santa Claus or the Eastern Bunny, they *exist*. We mean that we trust in them, have confidence in them, and are willing to act on the basis of that trust and confidence. Just what this amounts to depends on the person, situation, and relationship. If a parent says to a child, “I believe in you” it means something different than when someone says they “believe in” a leader. When I was a child growing up in Baltimore, our football team, the Colts, had a quarterback named Johnny Unitas. Unitas was famous for his ability to lead the team down the field at the end of a game to come from behind and win. His teammates and fans believed in him. Great military leaders like Alexander the Great and Napoleon inspired a similar sort of confidence. When Napoleon escaped his first exile and returned with a small army to France, the French army that was sent out to oppose him instead joined up with him, believing he was the man who could lead them to victory and France to greatness.

One of the most amazing stories I have heard about people believing in a leader is that of Ernest Shackleton’s 1915 Antarctic voyage. In one way, the expedition was a disaster. An early freeze got their ship iced in unexpectedly, and it soon became clear that they could not survive the winter where they were stuck. After the ice crushed the hull and the ship sank, Shackleton took a group of sailors in a rowboat and traversed nearly a thousand miles of the world’s most dangerous seas in the Antarctic winter, made it to an inhabited island, and then brought back a rescue party to save the rest of the crew. It was an extraordinary feat, not only of navigation, but also of courage and endurance. Shackleton’s men must have believed in him immensely as a captain and navigator to hold them together over

weeks of a freezing, wet journey through icy conditions, terrifying storms, and mountainous seas. I don't know whether they believed *that* they would make it, in the sense of what they would have predicted had they given betting odds. As experienced seamen familiar with the seas and the route, they no doubt understood that, if they made it, it would forever be remembered as one of the greatest sea journeys in history. In fact, they probably would have been wise to avoid thinking about the probabilities at all, as doing so might have eroded their nerve. Instead, they put their faith in Shackleton's leadership (and no doubt many of them in God as well), and this pulled them through against the most improbable odds. Of course, they had little choice, and they knew it. To *not* risk the journey would have meant almost certain death. But many people would have simply given up at some point. Indeed, I suspect that even Shackleton's crew might have given up without their faith in their captain.

Let me contrast this with a different kind of story, one about myself. I was one of those children who is terrified of swimming. Even in the YMCA's special class for children afraid of the water, I was the one who clung to the side of the pool, unwilling to let go. I remember the teacher working with me, trying to get me to trust her to hold me up in the water, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. The problem was not that I did not believe *that* my body could float or that she could and would take care of me if I ran into problems. It was clear enough, if I considered it, that the other children were doing just fine in her care, and that she, an adult, was perfectly capable of lifting me out of the water if she had to and carrying me to safety on the side of the pool. The problem was that I could not or would not let go



of my fears and put my trust in her – that I would not believe in her in the necessary way.

The point of these stories is that there is a difference between believing *that* something is true and believing *in a person* to an extent that you entrust your life to him or her. No doubt some of the people who left their former lives to follow Jesus had intellectual misgivings, or did not even know what to believe about him, yet there was something about him that inspired a faith that, as Peter put it, “you are the one who has the words of everlasting life.” [] On the other hand, I have known people who became convinced that the Christian message was likely to be true, yet balked at the step of turning over their lives to Jesus. For many Christians, one or the other of these things came first and the other followed. Some first experience an intellectual conversion – believing that the Christian story is true – and only later invite Jesus into their hearts. For many, it works the other way around: they first respond in trust, perhaps not fully convinced or even fully knowing what they are to believe, and then lead a life of faith seeking understanding.

Of course, similar considerations apply to the word ‘faith’. Sometimes, we think of faith as a matter of believing things without evidence, or at least without the kind of decisive evidence we might like to have. If I did not witness an event myself, I might have to take a witness’s testimony “on faith”. From this perspective, “faith” might seem like a kind of second-rate belief, inferior to belief based on personal experience, photographic evidence, scientific experiment, or the kind of rigorous proof we get in mathematics. Sometimes this kind of reliance upon the word of others is the best an individual can do. I cannot repeat the physicist’s experiments

or the advanced mathematician's proofs, but I tend to believe their claims. (When you think about it, for most of us, what we believe about "what science tells us", about history, or about the events we hear about in the news is based in this kind of reliance upon the testimony of others whom we trust, or at least have no reason to distrust.)

But the word 'faith', as used in the Bible, is not so much about believing a proposition as *trusting in a person*. When Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, "had faith" in God's promise, his attitude towards the promise was based in his trust in the God who had made it. He believed that what God had promised would come true because he trusted God to do what God had said he would do. And in many of the passages in the Gospels in which Jesus comments upon the faith of people he interacts with, the story does not involve any prior teaching about Christian *doctrine*. In Mark's Gospel in particular, it is clear that no one, including the disciples, knows what to make of Jesus before his resurrection. Their faith is not a faith *that some set of doctrines is true*; it is a faith *in Jesus, the person*. Indeed, when the first disciples are called and leave their fishing nets to follow Jesus, he has not taught them any theological doctrines at all. All that he does is say, "follow me," and they drop their nets and leave their old lives behind to follow him.

Clearly, there must have been something incredibly powerful about Jesus' presence to inspire the reactions that we find in the Gospels. When we read the Gospels, we can see it second-hand through the eyes and testimony of those who were there. But perhaps not *only* through *their* eyes and testimony, but also those of people we know and many in the centuries in between who have had a powerful

experience of Jesus' love and transforming power. Jesus did not send his disciples out to teach courses in theology or philosophy. He told them to be his *witnesses*, to tell what they had seen and heard, and to show its transforming influence through their love for one another. As I suggest in other chapters, it was largely the work of later generations to try to distill and formulate this into a well thought-out set of *beliefs*.

Obviously, I think that the things that Christians believe – their beliefs-*that* – are important. Otherwise, I would not have written a book like this one. But if you look back over what I have said about Christian belief, it should be clear that the point of it was never that what is most important is to have a particular set of beliefs, but to enter into a life-changing – and live-*giving* – relationship with God in Christ. It is true that, in order to do this, it is necessary or at least helpful to *understand* certain things. But understanding them is not enough. And indeed, one does not *fully* understand them until one *lives* them. The idea that I can be released from bondage to my twisted and fallen nature may be somewhat intelligible in advance. But it takes on its full meaning only when I experience what it is like, in at least part of my life, and to get there, I have to take a step of faith. Once I have experienced that, I can more vividly anticipate and desire what it will be like to have that freedom expanded to the other corners of my life that are still in the shackles of sin, and I gain increasing trust in God to lead me along each step of the path. Perhaps there can be an intermediate step as well: I meet someone who was once hopelessly bound as I am, but has been delivered, and I can see the living reality of the

transforming grace in their lives and how they speak of it, and this inspires me not only to desire the same thing for myself but also to believe that it is possible.

Jesus said, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” [Rev 3:20] Believing *in* Jesus is not just believing *that* he is knocking at the door of your heart, but letting him in to dwell there. Believing *in* Jesus as savior is not just believing *that* he died for the sins of the world, but actively receiving the offer of salvation and asking him to take away your sins. Believing in Jesus as lord and God is not just believing *that* he is divine and has authority over the world, but yielding to him authority over your own life from this time forward. Believing in Jesus is not just believing *that* he can bestow new and everlasting life, but seeking his guidance in every aspect of your life, trusting him to transform the fallen aspects of your character into a new nature that is like his. Believing in Jesus as the lord of life is not just believing that the dead in Christ will dwell forever with him, but trusting that you will be among them if you turn over your life to him for salvation and renewal and live as someone whose values are shaped by a belief in eternal life as a child of God.

## Repentance

In the Gospels, the call to believe in Jesus is often paired with a call to repentance. But what is repentance, and what does it have to do with belief in Jesus?

The most common understanding of repentance is that it involves feeling remorse for one's sins, confessing them, and asking God's forgiveness. This is, indeed, an important part of repentance; and for those who are drawn to the Good News because their souls are burdened by guilt, the hope for forgiveness may be foremost in their minds. Admitting that we are sinners, and indeed that in some parts of our lives we are slaves to sin, is an important part of accepting the Good News, because it is a recognition of the *bad* news that we are in need of salvation. For some, it may be important to confess *particular* sins that are troubling them – to God and perhaps to a Christian minister – as a part of receiving the Good News. Christians believe that Christ washes away *all* our sins, not only those we are aware of and confess. But in my experience, confessing particular sins and receiving assurance that they are forgiven can be a remarkably freeing experience.

Christian repentance is closely tied to believing in Jesus. It is more than merely bemoaning one's past deeds and inability to keep from doing the same things again. Jesus promised forgiveness to those who repent and receive him, and so a person confesses sins in the faith that Jesus will blot them out. A person may have known his faults and transgressions for years and admitted them to himself and to others. But without the assurance of forgiveness, this may have only piled

guilt and shame upon the already heavy burden of sin. The Christian Good News is that when we not only confess our sins, but turn them over to God, they are forgiven in Christ.

Thus far, it might seem as though repentance is related only to one part of believing in Jesus, the part dealing with the forgiveness of past sins. But the Christian notion of repentance is actually much deeper than this. In fact, the Greek word that is translated as ‘repentance’ – *metanoia* – has a richer meaning, so much so that some scholars think it would be better translated by other English words, such as ‘conversion’ or ‘transformation’.

The word *metanoia* is composed of one of the Greek words for *mind* (*nous*) and the prefix *meta-*, meaning “after”. So *metanoia* means something like “change of mind” or “transformation of mind”. It isn’t simply changing your mind about some particular thing, but a fundamental re-orientation of how you think about things, how you see the world and your own life, what you value, what kinds of things you wish to do, what kind of person you wish to be. Before, we acted out of our own desires, or out of habit or the expectations of the people around us. Afterwards, we seek God’s will. Before, we were powerless over our sinful impulses and felt the burden of guilt for things we had done. Afterwards, we trust that we are forgiven, and that God’s Holy Spirit is at work in us transforming our natures, releasing us from the burden of guilt and allowing us to live joyous and abundant new lives. Over time, we come to love and desire what God loves and desires, and indeed we begin to love as God loves. Before, we lived in the fear of death. Afterwards, we live in the hope of everlasting life. This re-orientation of the mind encompasses all of

the things that Christians trust in Jesus to bring about in their lives. As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” [Romans 12:2]

Clearly the Biblical notion of *metanoia* contains more than simply admitting our guilt for particular things we have done and seeking God’s pardon. But the connection between remorse over our past misdeeds and the need for a more radical change in our innermost being is clear enough if we think it through. If we seek *only* forgiveness, without any intention or desire for a change in how we live, we are not really seeking to receive the gift of new life in Christ. If we truly regret the things we have done out of anger, jealousy, lust, or simple heedlessness, we will not wish merely to be forgiven for them, but to become to kind of people who no longer do such things, or even wish to do them. We will wish to be rid, not only of sinful actions, but the disordered (and often painful) condition of our souls that inspires them. And if we come to see that the root cause is the absence of a relationship with God in our lives, and that this is what has left us to follow our own wills and our own distorted desires, we will wish to have God in our lives to heal and guide us. In short, when Jesus knocks at the door, we will wish to invite him in, and be willing to re-order our lives to make our hearts a fitting place for him to dwell with us.

Let us consider further this idea of Jesus standing at the door and knocking. The verse says that all a person has to do is open the door and he will come in and dine with them. But John’s Gospel makes it clear that Jesus does not intend to leave

after an evening's visit. In it, Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

[John 14:22] The idea is not that Jesus is inviting himself over for dinner, but that he wishes to move in. In effect, Jesus wishes to become your roommate! This is, of course, a metaphor for Christ coming to dwell *within* us. Christians do not set aside a room in their homes with a bed and dresser for Jesus or set a place at the dinner table for him. But we can learn things about ourselves if we meditate on the idea of Jesus literally coming to the door of our home and proposing to move in with us.

Imagine that one day you found Jesus truly knocking at the door of your home. He has not come for a brief visit — he says that he would like to move in with you. If your housekeeping is like mine, you might quickly start thinking about the stack of unwashed dishes in the sink, the silly program blaring on the television, the layer of dust on the floor, the places where the paint is peeling, the clutter of things "temporarily" stored in the guest room, perhaps the lingering smell of tobacco or the evidence of last night's fast food dinner. I might well feel ashamed and think something similar to what the centurion said to Jesus in Matthew 8:8: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." But Jesus smiles and says, "I'll help you straighten up." Clearly, a great deal would have to change if Jesus were to move in with me. I would have to get rid of a lot of the clutter to make room for him. My habits as well as my housekeeping would have to change. My life would become very different. But it would also be an infinitely better and richer life. I wouldn't even fully know in advance what all would change or what the new life would be like. Indeed, it is something we would have to work out together, Jesus and I. To say



“yes, please dwell with me” is also to commit myself to whatever changes are required. Some of them might be difficult. But looking around and the disorder of my life, and thinking on who Jesus is, I know that they would be changes for the better.

True repentance involves a yearning for a different type of life. It may come in the form of a desperate desire for change in some specific area in one’s life – to no longer walk under a cloud of guilt or shame or be plagued by anxiety, anger, resentment, jealousy, or lust; to love and be loved; to live with a sense of purpose; to have one’s real gifts flourish in a meaningful way. Or it may be that one senses, as the disciples did, that a life with Jesus holds unimagined possibilities, possibilities so rich that one is willing to give up everything that holds us back from attaining them.

## **Baptism**

In addition to belief in Jesus and repentance, there is also a third thing that Christians understand to be an important part of receiving the Good News: baptism. Baptism is a ritual in which the person becoming a Christian is either immersed in water or else has water poured over her head, invoking the names of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians view this as the outward expression of a spiritual transformation in which a person’s sins are washed away and she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Baptism has always been the rite Christians have used to mark the transition into a new life in Christ. Jesus was himself baptized by John the Baptist,

and it was at that moment that the Holy Spirit descended upon him. [] When Jesus gave the Great Commission, he told his disciples to [“preach the Good News to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”. []]

The symbolism of baptism is clear enough: we cleanse our bodies through bathing in water, and the ritual of baptism symbolizes a *spiritual* cleansing – the washing away of sin. Of course, Christians do not believe that water can wash away sin the way it can wash away dirt and perspiration. Taking a shower does nothing to cleanse us from sin, and pouring water over someone’s head in baptism is not even much of a bath. Christians believe that it is Christ, and not the water, that takes away sin; but the ceremony of baptism is what Jesus prescribed for those wishing to be cleansed from sin and begin a new life. Some Protestant Christians view the ceremony as purely symbolic, but even they are scrupulous about baptizing new Christians, as it is an action that Christ himself commanded. Most Christians, however, have understood it to be something more than just a symbol. They do not, of course, regard it as magic, nor do they think that water can wash away sin. In the language of the Church, it is regarded as a *sacrament*, a word that is often defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”.

We know from the New Testament that the earliest Christians considered baptism to be extremely important, and regarded it as the passage into new life in Christ and into membership in the Church. In the biblical accounts, people were generally baptized as soon as they believed the Good News. Over the following centuries, the Church began to incorporate baptism into its liturgical life, and people

were baptized primarily on Easter, following a period of repentance and instruction in the Christian life. The Church also baptized infants, who had presumably not yet accepted Christ for themselves, believing that it was important for them to receive the grace conferred in baptism as soon as possible. Christians throughout the ages have continued to baptize new Christians, though in the Reformation, some Protestant groups (such as the Baptists) rejected the practice of baptizing infants and perform baptism only when a person has made a commitment to Christ.

The Biblical accounts of baptisms do not tell us exactly what was said and done when a person was baptized, beyond the fact that the person was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many Christian denominations today have specific ceremonies for baptism, most of them rooted in ancient Christian tradition. The ceremony involves more than immersion or pouring of water. It incorporates all of the elements of the passage from the old life to the new: renunciation of sin, proclamation of Christian belief, acceptance of Jesus as savior and lord, commitment to a Christian life, and a sign of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. In the ritual of baptism, candidates for baptism are asked a series of questions. (When infants are baptized, the parents are asked these questions and answer on behalf of the child.) First, they are asked to renounce sin, the world, the flesh, and the devil. Then, they are asked to affirm their faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to accept Jesus as their savior and lord. Next, the celebrant either immerses them three times or pours water over their heads three times, in the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and traces the sign of the cross on their foreheads in oil as a sign of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Those present also

pray that the candidate may be delivered from sin, filled with the Holy Spirit, live a holy and righteous life, and receive eternal life, and they commit themselves to support the new Christian in her new life to the best of their ability.

## Accepting Christ

In more practical terms, then, what must one do in order to receive the Free Gift of salvation? The first thing is to pray to God, confessing and repenting your sin, asking Jesus to take away your sin and bestow the gift of salvation, and inviting him into your heart as your savior and lord. You do not need to be at a church service or a revival meeting. You do not even need to be in the company of other people. When it happened for me, I was alone in my family's living room on a sunny winter's afternoon. There is not a particular set of words you need to say. What is really essential is a turning of your heart and mind and will away from sin and towards God, opening the door to Jesus to take away your sin and become your savior and the lord of your life. Indeed, for some people it happens without words. C.S. Lewis, for example, describes his own conversion to Christianity in the following terms:

I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. "Emotional" is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake. **And it was, like that moment on top of the bus, ambiguous.** [Surprised by Joy, Chapter XV]

Lewis experienced his conversion as something that had changed within him, like waking up from a long sleep. His autobiography makes it clear that this had been preceded by a great deal of *doing* – thinking, arguing, even praying – all the while resisting the Christian message. (He described himself as “the most reluctant convert in all England”. []) But what he regarded as the final step, his passage from merely believing that there is a God to being a Christian, he experienced more as something that had happened within him, something he was aware of only once it had been completed.

Saint Augustine’s experience was in some ways much like Lewis’s. His autobiography, the *Confessions*, describes a long intellectual voyage to Christianity, but he was reluctant to take the decisive step. He had come to hate his sins, yet also was reluctant to give them up and turn his life wholly over to God. For him, the decisive moment came alone in a garden, when he felt directed to open the Bible and read.

So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; Take up and read. " Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find. For I had heard of Antony, that coming in during the reading of the Gospel, he received the admonition, as if what was being read was spoken to him: Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me: and by such oracle he was forthwith converted unto Thee. Eagerly then I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence. No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away. [Confessions, Book 8]

Words indeed played an important part in Augustine's conversion, but they were not words he said, but words he read from the Bible. When he read them, he felt a dramatic change within him, like passing from darkness into light.

Augustine and Lewis were both exceptionally articulate and thoughtful people, and each had a memorable conversion experience after years of agonizing searching. If you were to ask a number of Christians how they came to Christ, you would probably hear a number of very different stories. Indeed, many people who were raised within the faith cannot remember a time when they did not feel Jesus in their lives and seek to follow him. If there was a particular day when they passed from unbelief to belief and accepted Christ into their hearts, it is lost to their memory. But being raised in a Christian household does not in itself establish a personal relationship with Jesus, and many people who grew up considering themselves Christian reach a time in their lives when they realize that, while they have known *about* Christ and the free gift of salvation all their lives, they have never *accepted* them for themselves. John Wesley had been a priest in the Church of England for ten years when he experienced the moment that he came to regard as his conversion. As recorded in his diary,

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. (*John Wesley Journal, May 24th 1738, Vol. 1. p.103*)

Those of us who were at one time something other than Christian – members of other religions, atheists, or people who had some vaguely-defined spiritual beliefs

but did not believe in Jesus as their savior – can often remember a time when they were at a crossroads, having heard the Good News and faced with a decision as to whether to accept or reject it. They may not have received an inner assurance that felt like waking up from a long sleep or passing from darkness to light, but instead called out to God in faith to be delivered from sin and death and to receive the new life that has been promised.

For those who experience this crossroads, this moment of decision, it can be helpful to accept Christ in words. If nothing else, doing so helps us to focus what we are doing and to make it explicit. Evangelists like Billy Graham – people who have a ministry of calling people to Christ – often invite people to say a prayer of acceptance, sometimes called a “sinner’s prayer”, that expresses the essentials. Here is an example taken from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association:

Dear God, I know I’m a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe that He died for my sin and that you raised Him to life. I want to trust Him as my Savior and follow Him as Lord, from this day forward. Guide my life and help me to do your will. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen. [<https://peacewithgod.net>]

Here is another example, this one taken from Campus Crusade, a Christian fellowship group active on college campuses.

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.  
[<http://crustore.org/fourlawseng.htm>]

It is important to bear in mind that such verbal formulas are presented as models that attempt to express in words the thoughts and attitudes of a person repenting

their sins and accepting Christ as savior and lord. They are not some kind of magical incantation that brings about a spiritual result if only you say the right words. Just saying them like an actor reciting his lines does not accomplish anything. What matters is that repentance, acceptance, and commitment take place in the heart. Expressing these in words may help some of us to take that step by making it explicit, but what is essential is the inner change. By the same token, if the heart is converted, there is no danger that it is all invalid because you did not say a particular set of words. The important thing is that we repent of our sins and invite Jesus into our hearts. We can do this using our own words, or we can use words prepared by others if they express what is in our hearts.

In my own case, becoming a Christian was altogether unexpected. My parents believed in God but did not identify with Christianity or any other particular religion. I had had a year or two of Sunday school and children's choir at the church at my neighborhood. (I recall liking the hymns and communion at the main church service far better than Sunday school, but I had always been the sort of child who preferred the company of grown-ups.) By my teens, I still had a strong spiritual thirst, but one that was somewhat vague in its definitions. Christians I had come to regard as narrow-minded and aligned with political views very different from my own. I joined my father in practicing transcendental meditation, and had a growing interest in esoteric subjects such as lost civilizations and UFOs, and read as many books on these topics as I could get my hands on. The covers of some of these books, such as Erich van Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, had a distinctive look to them, and I tended to frequent the section of the bookstore where they might be found. One day I found



there a book called *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which had the look and sound of a book of the same genre. I must have been surprised and a bit dismayed when I found that it was in fact a *Christian* book. I do not remember much about my experience of reading it, but when I began it, I was decidedly not a Christian, and by the time I finished it, I was a believer. In the last chapter of the book, there was an invitation to accept Jesus that read as follows:

if you are not sure that you have personally accepted the gift of God's forgiveness which Jesus Christ purchased by bearing the judgment of a holy God that was due your sins, then you should do so right now wherever you are. It may be that you are bothered because you can't understand it all, or you feel that you don't have enough faith. Don't let either of these things stop you. The only thing you need to understand is that God offers you in Jesus Christ a full pardon and new spiritual life. If you truly desire to receive Jesus Christ into your life, then you have enough faith to enter God's family and change your eternal destiny.

Jesus put the whole thing in a very picturesque way when He said: "Behold, I stand at the door [of your heart] and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine [have fellowship] with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20 NASB).

Right at this moment, in your own way, thank Jesus for dying for your sins and invite Him to come into your heart. The door of the above illustration is your desire and will. You open the door by inviting Jesus Christ into your life. [*the Late Great Planet Earth*]

I did as the author suggested, and said an explicit prayer inviting Jesus into my life. I do not recall the words I used, but that day redirected the course of my life ever afterwards.

I began attending church with my next door neighbors, as I did not yet have my driver's license at the time, and when I went off to college, attended the university chapel. At some point, I became aware of the importance of baptism. I was in the unusual position of not knowing whether I had been baptized or not. My parents had not had me baptized, but my mother seemed to remember that my

grandmother (who had died when I was very young and hence was not available for consultation) might have taken me off to be baptized as an infant at the Catholic church she had attended. (I confirmed this only years later going through a box of old documents which included my baptismal certificate.) Christians regard baptism as a one-time affair, but fortunately my church has a variation on the service called “provisional baptism” for cases where it is unknown whether the candidate has already been baptized. My church was so kind as to arrange a special provisional baptism for me at a weekday service while I was at home from college, as I was not available for the normal baptismal service on Easter.

If you accept Christ but have not been baptized, it is also important to seek baptism. This is generally done by becoming part of a church community, so it is important to try to find a church that will support you in your new life as a Christian. Most churches require that you undergo some form of instruction (traditionally called “catechism”, though some churches may call it by a different name) as a preparation for baptism, and the length and details of these differ from church to church. Many also require a declaration of faith similar to that of the baptismal service (but without a second baptism) for new members who had already been baptized. In my experience, adult baptism can be a deeply moving experience. Even if you have had a powerful conversion experience like Augustine’s, baptism makes your faith a public fact, witnessed by others, and the public declaration of faith and vows can strengthen and solemnify your faith. I *sought* it because Christ had commanded it, but *going through* it deepened me as a Christian in ways that went beyond the act of obedience with which it began. In baptism, a Christian also

becomes a part of the Church – not only the Church Universal (which includes all Christians in every place and time), but also some particular local community of believers. To these topics we shall return in Chapter [xx].

**[8]****Sanctification**

The diagnosis of the “bad news” that we need to be saved in Chapter [5] included a number of factors: the burden of guilt for our sins, the deeper condition of spiritual fallenness that renders us powerless against our own sinful desires, the absence of living relationship with God, the fear of death, and the external evils that afflict us in a fallen world. Christians believe that, in Christ, we have received forgiveness of sins and the promise of everlasting life, and that at the end of the age, Jesus will return and recreate a new and just world. But that leaves unaddressed the fallen state of our nature that was the main focus of Chapter [4] – our *sinfulness* – and the nature of the new relationship with God that we need in order to become the sorts of beings that we must assume God wishes us to become. *Without* such a change, the rest of it – forgiveness of sins and everlasting life – might sound a bit *cheap*. And indeed, eternal life without thoroughgoing inner change might not turn out to be such a blessing as we might initially suppose.

To see what I mean, suppose that forgiveness of sins were the sum total of the Christian Good News: that God forgave sins without expecting a change of life or providing the means to achieve it. If a governor granted a full pardon to everyone convicted of a crime, you can well imagine that there would be a great deal of

celebration in the prisons as the doors were opened and the prisoners turned out onto the streets. But if they went back to doing the same things that had gotten them there in the first place, the governor's blanket pardon would not make the world or the prisoners themselves better than they were before. Indeed, if the pardon included all *future* crimes as well, this might just embolden many of them to sin more brazenly. No doubt some would have a deep desire to lead a different sort of life and not return to their old ways, and being released from prison would provide *part* of what they need in order to do that. But it would not provide *everything* that would be required, because they would need to become different sorts of people than they were before as well.

Of course, while we are all sinners, most of our sins are not of the sorts that normally land a person in prison. We are not all murderers, thieves, extortionists, or rapists. Our spiritual captivity is more like an *inner* prison. What I have called the doorstep to understanding the Good News is the recognition that something *within us* deprives us of true freedom and forces us to remain the kinds of people that we do not wish to be. Once we have attained this recognition – knowing the *bad* news – the prospect of being forgiven the particular sins we have committed is indeed welcome, but it is not enough. What we wish for is to stop being the sorts of people who do – or even *want* to do – such things. The prospect of everlasting life *without fundamental inner change* may, on reflection, seem more like a curse than a blessing. If eternal life meant living forever constantly tormented by rage, jealousy, and self-hatred, that would be more a description of hell than of heaven. Indeed, one of the reasons people want to die, or even consider suicide, is that going on in

life as they know it is simply too painful to endure, and they hope that death will put an end to the torment, even if it extinguishes their very existence as well.

This, I think, gives us a new perspective on the connection between sin and mortality first broached in discussing the expulsion from Eden in Genesis 3. Recall that, in addition to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there was also a second special tree in the garden: the tree of life. The final verses of the chapter suggest that eating of *that* tree conferred everlasting life.

Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” — therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22-23)

These verses directly connect the expulsion from Eden to the fear that fallen human beings would eat of the tree of life and live forever. Depriving human beings of the fruit that would confer immortality is often interpreted as a sort of divine *punishment* for sin. But in light of what we have been saying, there is another way of understanding it. Going on forever as a slave of sin – of wrath, jealousy, dishonesty, hatred, and the rest – would indeed be a heavy burden, perhaps an intolerable one. For a fallen soul, death itself would eventually come to seem like a *mercy*. Eternal life is a blessing only if it is the sort of life where there is true freedom and the capacity for continual growth freed from the shackles of sin.

If this is the case, then it is no accident that the Bible presents the offer of *eternal* life only as a radically transformed life, a life lived in communion with God, in which, not only are our past sins forgiven, but we are given the power to change

and to grow from strength to strength as children of God. It is only in this condition that unending life would be something truly to be desired. And arguably, even in our dissatisfaction with our fallen lives, we in fact already possess the seeds of desire for a different sort of life, even if we can only dimly imagine what it might be like.

## Sanctification

We need a name for the condition that is the opposite of our fallen state of being. One term Christians use is “holiness”. In Latin, the word for “holy” is *sanctus*, and hence Christians speak of the process of becoming holy as *sanctification*. The exhortations “be holy” or “you shall be holy” are in fact repeated no less than nine times in the Bible. It occurs several times in the Old Testament – for example, in Leviticus 19:2, “Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’” And it is repeated twice in the first letter of Peter. “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:14-16)

The charge to be holy sounds like something quite daunting, and in a sense it is a tall order. But it is important to disabuse ourselves of some misunderstandings we might have about the notion of holiness. We tend to think of holiness as a quality

reserved for a special class of great saints and not something that people like you or I could possess. Holy people, we think, are something like spiritual virtuosi, endowed with native abilities that allow them to be different from the rest of us. We think that, while we might become a bit better than we are now, we could never be good in the way Saint Francis was good, much as we think that, while we might get a bit better at math or science, we could never be another Newton or Einstein. Newton and Einstein were simply much smarter than we are, and St. Francis was simply much holier. If that is the way to think about it, and God requires holiness, most of us might as well give up.

But that is *not* the way to think about it. Holiness is not a component of our natural character, like an aptitude for music or mathematics. It is something that is imparted only by God's grace through the Holy Spirit, and it is something that is generally attained only gradually and in degrees. The surest way to become disabused of the notion that holiness is an innate quality that some people are born with and others are not is to read stories of the lives of the saints. (Or, if you know people you consider holy, to talk with them about their lives.) Saint Francis is a good example, not only because he is familiar to so many people and had a reputation for being a particularly holy person, but also because we also know a fair amount about his whole life. We think of Francis primarily as the founder of a monastic order, the Franciscans, who give up all of their possessions, lead a very simple life in which they obtain all that they need by begging, and serve the poor. Francis himself led such a life, and did so in a fashion that inspired many to join him in it. But no one who knew Francis as a young man would have predicted that this



was how he would turn out. Indeed, his given name was not Francis at all, but Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone. He was the son of a wealthy silk merchant of the town of Assisi. As a young man, he loved nothing more than fancy clothes and extravagant parties with his wealthy friends. The nickname “Francis” may well have been conferred because of his taste for fancy French fashions. He was, in short, a spoiled rich kid, a dandy, and a party boy.

It was only after a series of visions, a pilgrimage to Rome in which he went begging with the poor, and an encounter with a beggar in the streets of his home town that Francis’s life took an about-face. He lost his taste for worldly things and began to sell family possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. He began to spend time alone in prayer and felt that God was calling him to a life of poverty and service. Several years later, after hearing a sermon on the Great Commission, he took its words to heart and began to travel preaching the Gospel. Starting a religious order was probably the furthest thing from his mind, but he began to attract people to him who saw the work of God going on within him, and they became his followers. He in fact never *liked* being the head of an order – indeed, for much of his life, he left others to lead it. He became the Francis we remember through a long series of steps in which he felt he heard God calling him to change and responded to that call.

I would strongly commend to the reader the idea of picking up one of the many books compiling the lives of various saints. What is perhaps most remarkable in reading about the lives of saints is that *they are all so different*. Not only did they live in very different ways and do very different things, the aspects of their character

that stand out to us as signs of holiness also vary greatly. They were people with different temperaments and gifts, they lived in different circumstances, and they started out from very different pasts. In many such stories, we are told something of the lives they had lived before their conversion. Many had not started out as very good people at all. Indeed, some had led lives of dissipation like the young Francis, others had even been bandits, murderers, or prostitutes. And in this, they can serve as models and as inspiration for us: their stories show us that, wherever you start out, God can change your life into a holy life, and every holy life is different, both from other holy lives, and from the old life that was abandoned.

### **How Does One Become Holy?**

Christians believe that holiness comes about through God's grace and our cooperation with it. 'Grace' is the word Christians use for the miraculous power of God which, working in unseen ways, enables us to do the things we are unable to do on our own power. In our own day, some of the most remarkable testimonies to grace are found in the stories of alcoholics and drug addicts who have become involved in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs. In addiction, a person often becomes aware of the hopelessness of her condition. She may desire nothing more than to be freed from her addiction, but finds herself unable to do so. The testimony of AA is that many people, once they acknowledge that they cannot save themselves but turn their problem over to God (or a "higher power"), are

suddenly and wonderfully changed. What was impossible before is now possible, perhaps even effortless. What they could not do for themselves, God has done for them by transforming them from within through grace.

To the best of my knowledge, there are not twelve-step programs for conditions like anger, bitterness, jealousy, or the many compulsions that do not involve substance abuse. But people are nonetheless released from them or cured of them. Sometimes it happens almost miraculously and in an instant, sometimes it is a long process requiring hard work. Inward change requires both God's unseen grace and our cooperation with it.

The operation of grace is, more or less by definition, something we do not understand. 'Grace' is the name Christians give to the ways God works changes for our good that we do not comprehend. But Christianity does provide *some* perspective for interpreting the work of grace. When we accept the free gift of salvation, God's Holy Spirit comes and dwells within us, and as a consequence, our nature is fundamentally changed. We are no longer simply natural organisms that bear the image of God only in a distorted form. We have a new kind of life within us as human beings filled with the Holy Spirit. Before we were like a crumpled glove, but as the hand of God is slipped into the glove, it begins to restore to the glove the image and likeness of the divine hand that fills it. And the Spirit begins to work changes within us that we cannot work for ourselves – perhaps like God mending holes in the glove or applying leather conditioner to it.

But the thing about grace is that it is never forced upon us. The recovering addict is no longer under an inner compulsion, but can still choose to take a drink or

shoot up with heroin. We can cooperate with grace, or we can reject it. Sometimes grace takes away even the desire to do what is wrong. But sometimes the desire remains, and what grace confers is the capacity to resist temptation. We are partners with God in the work of our own sanctification. Indeed, many people have the experience that change comes in three stages. Initially, there may be a period – sometimes indeed referred to as a “period of grace” – in which our old temptations seem miraculously removed. Sometimes they never return, but often this is followed by a period in which we are tempted – either by the same old things or by other things that we might not even previously have recognized as problems – but God provides the grace to resist. It is generally only through years of cooperation with grace on a day by day basis that our character is so transformed that a sinful desire is wholly eradicated, and few if any people are freed from all sinful impulses in this life.

Holiness is thus not so much a fully achieved state as a process of *being made holy*, being gradually transformed into the image and likeness of Christ. It is certainly not an innate character trait of a few special people. It is something that we are all called to take part in when we receive the free gift of new life in Christ. It is for this reason that, in the New Testament, the word ‘saint’ is applied to *all Christians*, because they are *in the process of being made holy*. The more familiar popular usage that applies only to people who have come a long way in this process is a later invention, and would probably have been foreign to the writers of the New Testament.

## The Parable of the Vine

One of Jesus' sayings that I find most helpful in understanding the process of sanctification is the Parable of the Vine, which I mentioned in a previous chapter. In it, Jesus says:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:1-11)

For more than half of my life now, I have found this parable to be one of the most moving and illuminating passages in the Bible, and my appreciation for it has deepened as I have learned more about plants and gardening. If you go out into a garden – as in fact I went into mine just now before writing these words – or take a walk in a park, you will probably be able to find a branch or at least a leaf on the ground. A branch removed from a plant is something with clear boundaries – you can plainly see where it begins and ends. It is, in some sense, an *individual*. (Not of course a *human* individual, but an individual *thing*.) But it is also something that has no way of living on its own. In a few hours it will wither in the sun and in a matter of days it will decompose. Indeed, even if it is still green and has some life left in it, it is

already dying. To live, it needs to be connected to the stem of the plant, from which it receives nourishment. This is a powerful metaphor for the Christian notion that we are only truly alive when we are connected to God, and that in the fallen state of separation from God, we are, in a sense, already dying.

On the other hand, when a branch is on the stem, not only does it draw life and nourishment from the stem, but it is also harder to define a clear boundary between branch and stem. Structurally, they are part of an organic unity. And at a deeper level, the same sap flows from the stem to the branch, and they share in the same DNA. Indeed, my appreciation of this parable deepened considerably some years ago when I learned something about grafting, which is a procedure that vinegrowers have been performing with grape vines for thousands of years. When a vinegrower grafts two plants together, he takes a cutting from one vine (perhaps one that has a particular type of fruit that is prized for its taste or can be used to make good wine) and binds it onto the stem of a different vine (perhaps one that is stronger and more resistant to cold or drought). The sprig then grows into a branch on a new vine, and as the splicing cuts heal, it becomes part of a larger organic unity. What surprised me was to learn that, as a result, the branch is also changed at the level of its DNA. Even considered by itself as a branch, it takes on something of the biological nature of the stem onto which it has been grafted.

I have come to consider this the best metaphor I know for the ideas that, when we begin a new life in Jesus, we are in fact incorporated into the life of God, that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me”, and that we are being transformed from our old mortal nature into Christ’s nature. It is, of course, a

metaphor. We are not *surgically* connected to Jesus, and the transformation that occurs is not a *biological* transformation but a *spiritual* one. Still, the metaphor suggests some very powerful ideas. Those who accept Jesus no longer live simply as independent beings, but are in some deep and mysterious sense united with God. It is not simply a second-person I-thou relationship between a human being and God. Additionally, there is a connection where the boundaries between God and the person who has received new life become somewhat unclear. Moreover, our own nature does not remain exactly as it was, but begins to change – we begin, as it were, to receive an infusion of Christ’s spiritual DNA. We will not, of course, become *another* Jesus Christ – we will not become gods in our own right. But neither will remain merely independent mortal organisms.

What we have been discussing is a view of the deep spiritual reality that Christians believe is at work in sanctification: God comes to dwell within us, and by his unseen grace begins to transform our mortal and sinful natures into something nobler – indeed, something that is indeed inseparable from God himself. This is something that is ultimately mysterious and beyond our understanding, and we can perhaps best grasp it through powerful metaphors like the vine and its branches. Personally, I find this a moving and edifying way of understanding what I have experienced of the Christian life. But by itself it does not provide much practical guidance – except, of course, to remind us of the central and essential truth that sanctification comes about only through abiding in Christ, and not through our own power.

I now wish to return, in a more practical way, to what a person encounters in the process of sanctification. Sanctification is a process through which our old fallen nature is transformed into a new and holy nature. It involves both relinquishing features of our old nature and embracing features of the new. The process of transformation comes about through God's action, but in it we must also cooperate in several ways. While we cannot deliver ourselves from the characteristics of our old nature, like hatred, jealousy, and lust, we must set our will against them and renounce them, and we must likewise renounce the things of this world that tie us to them, corrupt us, and separate us from the love of God. Likewise, while growth into the new life is not something we can make happen on our own, we must nonetheless play our part in it, by seeking God's presence, obeying his commandments, and cultivating the seeds of virtue that he provides.

## **Two Sides of Sanctification**

The very notion of *new* life already implies a transition from one condition to another. The old life had its own set of activities, habits, attitudes, values, and commitments; and many of these must be abandoned in order to take on the new activities, habits, values, and commitments that will become part of the new life in Christ. Some of what this will mean may be perfectly clear from the outset; but when we begin a new life, there is always also a great deal that emerges only as we begin to live and grow in it. A relationship with God is clearly a central part of the



new life, but we have little idea when we begin just what “a relationship with God” will mean in practical terms. Even a new relationship with another human being – a new friend or colleague, having a child, or the kind of relationship that might lead to marriage – is something that unfolds gradually and over time, and we cannot foresee the many ways it may develop over the years, even if we have already experienced many other such relationships in the past. A relationship with God is by its nature absolutely unique, as are the transformations that it alone can bring about.

Likewise, it may be clear enough, from the specific list of things that an individual knew he needed to be delivered from, that *certain particular* things need to change. If a person was a thief or an addict, he must stop stealing or taking drugs. This is something he very likely already knows, and indeed may want to be saved specifically in order to be delivered from these things. He might also realize fairly quickly that, in order to do this, he will need to stop associating with the circle of friends who shared his vices and find a new set of friends with different habits and values. But over time he might come to realize other thing, such as that his prior compulsion to steal was rooted in a sense of insecurity, hopelessness, or resentment – deeper features of his personality that need to be healed and replaced by trust in God, hope, and gratitude. If he had turned to alcohol or drugs to blunt the pain of anxiety or grief, he may need to find healing and release from these underlying conditions, whose nature may be revealed more clearly and faced more honestly once the temporary anesthetic has been taken away. The new life may ultimately

bring new attitudes of confidence and hope, or a new set of ways of dealing with insecurity and despair when they occur.

But there are also changes we cannot anticipate. When God's grace began to work in Francis's life, he immediately lost his interest in fancy clothing and parties and felt a desire to be generous to beggars. But neither he nor anyone else around him would have predicted that he would gradually feel called to give up his inheritance, become a monk and a travelling preacher, or start a religious order that would transform the Church – and certainly not that he would (as he in fact eventually did) cross the battle lines of the Crusades to preach Christ to the Moslem Caliph! And if someone had told him this at the outset, probably not even he could have predicted that he would *find joy* in doing them. Francis's story, of course, is quite unusual. Someone who expects that he will be called to do the same things that God called Francis to do is likely to have the wrong expectations. In fact, if you talk to five or six people at church about their lives before and after accepting Christ, you are likely to find that their answers are as different in their details as are the people themselves.

But there can be no question that the process of sanctification will involve two components: giving up some things that have previously been a part of one's life and taking up other things in their place. Some of the changes may happen suddenly and dramatically when a person first receives Christ and puts her lives into his hands. (AA and other 12-step programs are full of stories of people who had reached a point where their condition was considered hopeless, but felt the drive to abuse alcohol miraculously removed and went on to live full, productive, and even

holy lives.) Others may come slowly and gradually, and only with a great deal of struggle. And some we discover only in retrospect – we suddenly realize that somehow, in ways we did not notice happening at the time, we have ceased to be angry, bitter, or jealous people, and have become kinder, more loving, gentle, and joyous instead. Christians believe that this process begins in our conversion and almost always continues throughout our entire earthly lives, being brought to perfection only in the resurrection. (As a bumper sticker I've often seen phrases it, "Be patient – God isn't finished with me yet!") Indeed, some theologians, like Gregory of Nyssa, have speculated that even when Christ returns and we are raised from the dead, we will not simply stay put in our spiritual development, but continue to grow "from glory unto glory."

In the following two sections, I shall discuss, in somewhat general terms, the two sides of sanctification. One side consists in the purging of the soul of all that is evil, fallen, and keeps us from the love of God and one another. Christians generally undertake a commitment to such change at the ceremony of baptism, at which they are washed with water as a sign of the cleansing of sin, using a formula in which they renounce "the world, the flesh, and the devil". The other side consists in the positive process of being remade into the image and likeness of Christ. The chief fruit of this is the growth of love, but the process involves both growth in understanding of God and the cultivation of virtue.

## **Renunciation of The World, the Flesh, and the Devil**

In the ceremony of baptism, in which those who are becoming Christians publicly accept Jesus as their savior and lord, they also renounce three things, described as “the world, the flesh, and the devil.” If you are new to Christian teaching, this may sound a bit mystifying, as it isn’t obvious what it would mean to “renounce the world” or “the flesh”, and many modern people regard “the devil” as an ancient superstition. I shall say something about what Christians mean by each of these words, and what it means to renounce them; but in most general terms, this is a formula that encompasses all of the things that corrupt us, tempt us, and keep us from loving God and one another. If our condition before we encounter the Good News is one of bondage to sin, these are names for the masters we serve, whether willingly or unwillingly. The acceptance of Christ and the renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil are thus really like two sides of a coin: to be freed from these things so as to love and serve God, we must also actively reject them.

We might equally well have talked about this topic in the chapter on salvation. I have waited until the chapter on sanctification for two reasons. The first reason is that, as I have said, our lives are not completely transformed at the moment we receive Christ. We may be immediately delivered from some forms of bondage, but as we grow in Christ, there is often continual struggle to be freed from others. Our eternal relationship with God in Christ is secure once we accept the free gift of salvation, but the work of sanctification is ongoing. The second reason is that it is often only as we undergo this ongoing work as conscious partners with God’s

grace that we really begin to understand what is meant by “the world, the flesh, and the devil” and the grip they have upon us.

So what do Christians mean by these words? Before addressing the question directly, let me mention an interpretation that might suggest itself, and which was indeed believed by many people, including some Christians, during the early centuries during which Christianity was growing, but which was rejected by the Church. In Chapter [2], I mentioned a group – or perhaps better a style of religion practiced by many different groups – called “Gnostics”. Gnostics believed that the world we see around us – the material world – is intrinsically evil, and in particular, that the human body is evil and the source of all our moral flaws and limitations. Some believed that this evil world was the creation of an evil spiritual being, the Devil. In their view, our true nature is as purely spiritual beings who are temporarily trapped in fleshly bodies in this material world, and the spiritual task is to become aware of this and free ourselves from it. This view, however, is plainly incompatible with the account of creation found in Genesis, and difficult to reconcile with the ideas that God truly became incarnate in Jesus, or that Jesus underwent a *bodily* resurrection and someday we will as well. And indeed, some of the Gnostics rejected the Genesis account, or even the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures, and held that Jesus only *appeared* to be a real human being.

While many of the historical disputes about doctrine were about things that only a theologian or philosopher could worry about (or even understand), I think it is obvious that there were fundamental issues at stake in the Gnostic controversy, and that the stakes were high. The Gnostic view leads us to despise not only the

material world, but also our own bodies. The Gnostic's only goal is to be free of them. (And it was even worse in that: whereas Christians believe that salvation is available to anyone who will receive it, many Gnostics believed it could only be obtained by a small number who were spiritually gifted, and hence the vast majority of humanity was not worth worrying about.) Christianity holds that God created the world and called it good, and that he will one day restore it to a perfect state. Moreover, Christians believe that God fashioned our bodies, and will raise us up from death in more perfect bodies. So the Christian understanding of renouncing "the world" and "the flesh" cannot be anything so drastic or so simple as hating the material world, including our own bodies, and seeking to be free from them. What, then, does it mean?

### **The World**

The Bible and the early Christians regularly contrasted "the world" and "being in the world" with the spiritual life proper for Christians. What they seem to have had in mind is not "the world" in the sense of the physical universe, but the ways we are guided by social habits and conventions. Our assumptions about how to live are largely formed through a process of acculturation by which we internalize the expectations of those around us. Each culture has its own implicit norms about how people are expected to act in various roles: father, mother, child, soldier, tax collector, merchant, ruler, peasant, judge, tyrant, master, slave. Some of these norms may be quite benign or even helpful, though the very inclusion of categories like tyrant, master, and slave is enough to show that others are intrinsically unjust.

Of course, however good a society's official moral code may be, we also know that there is also another set of rules as well – rules about who can get away with what, how to work the system with impunity, how to get one's own way at the expense of others. People who are rich, or powerful, or know how to work the system can take advantage of those who cannot. People who learn how to bully, intimidate, manipulate, or blackmail often succeed at the expense of others. Some people are much better at this than others, but at some time or other each of us has probably both exploited our knowledge of "how the world works" in this way and been a victim of it. As Henri Nouwen wrote, "Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul." [Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, p. 11]

The dominion of "the world" has several aspects. At the most basic level, we are social beings who live in families, communities, nations, and other social units. And each of these units has its own customs and norms – sometimes explicit, but often left unarticulated – which we unconsciously internalize. They have a hold upon us because they have become a part of us. We may, indeed, question and rebel against some of them; but when we do so, there are generally consequences. Break the law and there are likely to be legal consequences. But break with the expectations of your family, your co-workers, or your peers, and there are consequences as well, like rejection, derision, and shaming. Depending on whether the norms in question are good or bad, this can be a beneficial or a harmful situation. It is probably all to the good that some people's inclinations towards dishonesty or

violence are held at least partially in check by fear of punishment or reproach, even if these fears do not cure the underlying problem. On the other hand, if the norm is, say, that members of one group can enslave those of another, or that the tougher kids can bully or make fun of those too small to fight back, or that husbands are allowed to beat their wives, or that one group can do what they like to another, it takes high moral courage to rebel against it. The laws, customs, and expectations that a group develops can itself shape moral character for better or for worse, and can create great burdens on those who are on the victim's side of unjust laws and customs. It is thus no surprise that the Bible presents God as eminently concerned with justice, and as judging societies for the justice or injustice of their laws and practices. Bad norms license behavior that causes harm both to the victim and to the soul of the perpetrator. And one of the most striking aspects of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels is the way he stepped outside of the laws and customs of his day to engage the full humanity of those that others treated as outcasts or unclean. God is above our customs and social norms, weighs them in the balance against true righteousness, and holds us to account for them.

At another level, "the world" presents temptations to "work the system" by doing unjust things that we think will gain us some advantage because we are the sort of people who can get away with it. We may be angry at one person whom we cannot confront with impunity and take it out on someone else who cannot defend herself instead. We may stand by and watch injustice without speaking out because it is easier and safer to do so. We may subtly undermine competitors for some job or honor we seek (perhaps even without outright dishonesty), especially if we enjoy



a good reputation and people are slow to question or think ill of us. Perhaps sometimes we feel pangs of conscience and try hard to justify our actions to ourselves. Or we may be so caught up in an unholy alliance between our pursuit of self-interest and our understanding of “how things are done” that we never stop to consider that it is not how things *ought* to be done, and regard those who think and behave otherwise as hopelessly naïve.

Once you come to believe that there is another and higher set of standards – God’s righteousness – all this begins to be chipped away. This might happen suddenly and dramatically, as when John Newton, the captain of a slave ship, suddenly realized, halfway across the Atlantic transporting a ship full of human beings to the Americas, that what he was doing was terribly wrong. Newton experienced a life-changing conversion, and spent the rest of his life fighting against slavery after turning around and returning the captives to their native soil. He later wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” about this experience. But more often, it happens in small ways, and bit by bit, as we realize a succession of small things we are doing are not what God would have us do. Once you believe that God is aware of your actions and the intentions behind them, you become more attentive to those actions and intentions, more sensitive to the question of whether they are right and good, regardless of whether they are overlooked or even approved by those around you or whether others do them as well. And, to the extent that you wish to be freed from the bondage of sin, there is a part of you that *wants* God to reveal the things you need to change, even when they are things the rest of the world approves of.

There are also what we might call *second-order* norms – expectations about how we should treat the norms themselves. For example, that the local norms should never be questioned, or that we should never confront people about their conduct. If we notice that the family matriarch is allowed to verbally abuse people, or that the boss acts inappropriately with young female employees, or that there is someone in the group that other people routinely interrupt while speaking, we often feel an inhibition against bringing it up. Norms are also part of the power structure of any group, and sometimes that structure is abusive. To challenge the norms is to challenge the power structure, and this often brings reprisals. Indeed, it was Jesus' challenges to social, political, and even religious norms that made the powerful people of his day wish to be rid of him. The Old Testament prophets suffered similarly, and it is quite reasonable to fear that we may suffer reprisals when we do so as well.

We, of course, are not Jesus. We have neither his perspective nor his authority. And not all challenges to norms and power structures are prophetic. It is always a difficult question when and how to engage them. But the Bible does at very least have a clear role for Christians to play in going to *one another* in love and confronting people about their sins, and if this fails, bringing the elders of the church into the conversation. Again, this is a difficult matter, requiring wisdom and prayer. And the key qualification is that we do so *in love* – recognizing that the other person is a flawed individual like ourselves for whom Christ also died, and hoping they will change for the better, not only for our sake but for their own as well. It is always risky business – we may lose a friend, or even a circle of friends, and in some cases

may suffer worse consequences. And there are many bad ways to do it – ways that will provoke only animosity and perhaps even further entrench the fault. It should be undertaken only after prayer and perhaps spiritual counsel with someone both wise and prayerful. But one rule of thumb is to consider how we would wish to be approached if the tables were turned. We, too, have hidden faults. We would indeed be better off if they were corrected, but how would we wish someone to approach us about them?

But there is also a third aspect of bondage to the world. Even with *good* norms – that is, ones that encourage us to do the right things – it is not enough to do them simply *because* they accord with social norms. A man might be faithful to his wife in the face of temptations to infidelity only out of fear of the cost of being found out, or simply because he has been taught that a good person does not do such things. Such norms can play an important role in guarding us from wrongdoing: it is surely better to be faithful out of fear or conventional morality than to cheat on one's spouse. But the person who is restrained from evil conduct *only* by such means still has a long ways to go before he is truly *good*.

A first step towards something better is to recognize how the infidelity would be *truly wrong* and displeasing to God, as opposed to simply being conventionally disapproved. If we believe that God's standards are both higher and truer than our own and those of our society, it is important to re-orient our own standards to those that are higher. Becoming more knowledgeable about the standards of goodness laid down in the Bible and becoming more sensitive to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit

can help bring about such a change. And resisting temptation simply because it is *wrong* or displeasing to God is a step forward.

But someone in this position eventually comes to hate the fact that he is still the sort of person who has such temptations in the first place. This reveals a further step of sanctification that he already to some extent desires: the transformation of his character and desires through the workings of God's grace. Often, this does not happen immediately or without inner struggle and prayer. We feverishly search for justifications for our desires and even the actions we desire to perform – in social convention, in rationalization, in the example of others who have done likewise – as though *those* things could trump the conviction to which the Holy Spirit has already brought us. There is the risk here that we may end up making idols of conventions, rationalizations, or the example of others in order to satisfy our temptations. It is here that we need to stand steadfast in the conviction we have been brought to about what is right and pleasing to God, while also praying for a deeper inner change so that we may become the sort of person who no longer even *wants* what is wrong. Few people ever reach this with respect to *all* areas of their lives in this earthly existence. But that does not mean that God is not working in us, only that he does so gradually, and in a fashion that increasingly requires our own cooperation with the outpouring of divine grace.

### **The Flesh**

This brings us to the second thing from which we need to be delivered, “the flesh”. Just as the Christian's renunciation of “the world” does not mean that

creation is evil, the renunciation of “the flesh” does not mean that the human body is evil. Yet our bodily nature is the source of many of our temptations – desires, fears, anger, hatred, jealousy – and the evils they can lead to. When we do wrong, it is often because we wanted something it was not right to take, or because we acted out of fear or anger or jealousy or some other negative emotion. Indeed, even when we restrain ourselves from wrong *actions*, it is disturbing enough that we *wanted* to perform them, and we may be left feeling ashamed at being the sort of person who would even want to, say, commit adultery or perform an act of violence. A decent person does not *want to want* such things; but our desires come unbidden, and we cannot stop wanting what we want through a simple act of the will. Even if I cared only about my own happiness and peace of mind, I would not wish to be habitually angry or jealous or tormented by lust, because these are distressing and even painful emotions. It is true that sometimes people enjoy such emotions. But it does not take that much reflection to become aware that they are harmful and a source of misery to the person who experiences them, and the person who realizes this can easily become inwardly divided – *having* certain desires, angers, resentments, and fears, yet also hating and ashamed of the fact that he has them. One would like to be a different sort of person, one who desires only things that are good and lawful to have, one who loves instead of hates, one who has what he needs and is grateful for it rather than jealous of others who have more.

To this condition, there are two natural but harmful reactions. The first is when, in hating what we might call our “destructive emotions”, we end up hating *ourselves*. My desires, resentment, and anger are, after all, *part of me*. I may neither

like nor respect people *like that*, and yet I myself am such a person. But self-hatred and shame are themselves destructive emotions, and so the condition is not only not remedied, but worsened. The alternative is to regard the destructive emotions that tempt and lead us to harmful actions as something *other* than myself. This may be of some limited benefit, as it allows us to distance ourselves from certain of our own emotions as things we do not wish to have, and helps us to see and hope for the possibility of existing without them. We saw in previous chapters that there have been philosophical and religious traditions that say that what *we* really are are immaterial souls, and that the emotions arise from the fleshly bodies in which we are temporarily trapped, but which are not really so much part of us as they are our prisons. The inevitable conclusion of this is that our bodies themselves are an evil from which we should long to be freed, ultimately by death, and in the meantime we need to temper them through a rigorous asceticism.

But Christians believe that God created human beings as *embodied* beings, and that all that God created is good. How can we reconcile this with the recognition, on the one hand, that much of our inclination towards evil is rooted in our nature as embodied beings, and, on the other hand, the Christian renunciation of “the flesh”? The answer has two parts. First, remember that Christians believe that our nature *as we find it today* is “fallen”. Our appetites and emotions are not in the state God intended, but are *disordered*. Some emotions, like jealousy, may be completely products of disorder, and not things God wanted us to experience at all. Others, like desires for food, comfort, companionship, and sex, are *good* things in their proper place; but in our disordered state we also experience them at inappropriate times

and towards inappropriate objects. What we should hope for is not to be creatures *without* desire or emotion, but ones who have the *right* desires and emotions (at the right times, towards the right objects) – people who love rather than hate, who rejoice when good things happen to ourselves and others rather than resenting them or wanting bad things to happen to anyone. What we need is not an elimination of the desires and emotions, but their therapy, healing, and transformation.

Being a good human being *requires* the right sorts of desires and emotions – particularly the healthy sort of love for both others and oneself that desires the genuine good of each and rejoices when it comes to pass, but also the courage to work for it and righteous anger when anyone is harmed or treated unjustly. And friendship, family, and the pleasures and desires associated with them are an important part, not only of natural human life, but also of our spiritual lives. Even the “more bodily” desires for food, comfort, safety, and sex are a part of the way God has designed our animal bodies to take care of themselves naturally and automatically, and in a fashion that is much more efficient than if we had to proceed purely through understanding. Imagine how difficult it would be to know how to take care of yourself if you did not feel hunger when your body needed food, or did not react with alarm to immediate dangers! Even sexual desire, which can get us into so much trouble if we follow it blindly, is what leads to the creation of new lives, as well as something that can become sublime in the context of loving marriage. Without a natural built-in *inclination* towards sex, it is hard to see how procreation would happen at all, and without it, you and I would never have existed, and no one

would know what is perhaps the most naturally pure form of human love, that of a parent for a child.

But there is also a second part of the answer, which stands in counterpoint to the first. Like the other animals, embodiment and the emotions are part of our nature. But they are not the *sum total* of our nature. Each (or at least many) of the emotions may be “experts” in their own domain when they are properly ordered. A person’s appetite for food may become disordered and cause him to want to eat far more than is good for him, or even to eat and drink things that are harmful; but a properly-ordered appetite is a good (and perhaps indispensable) indicator of what the body needs. Being hungry makes me want food when my body needs it, but hunger itself does not distinguish between the food on my plate and the food on my neighbor’s plate, or even between healthy and unhealthy food. Being afraid may be a good indicator that a situation is dangerous, but fear itself does not tell me how the situation should be handled: sometimes I should run, sometimes I should confront danger, sometimes I should even endure pain and harm to secure a greater good. And of course I might be the sort of person who lives in a perpetual state of fear, even of things of which I need not be afraid. Even a noble emotion such as compassion needs further guidance: it may bid me to alleviate suffering and distress, but does not itself tell me how best to do so. Doctors have to be very careful, for example, in prescribing painkillers, because they can become addictive and lead to a condition far worse than a temporary pain that could be endured. A parent needs to know when it is best to address a child’s distress herself and when it is time for the child to do things for himself or to learn to overcome disappointment. The child,



living only in a world of immediate desire, does not yet know that switching from milk to solid food is ultimately for his own good.

Human beings are creatures with a capacity for *understanding* as well as emotion. We begin with very little understanding, and must rely on the understanding of adults around us to lead us towards maturity. This is made easier to the extent that a bond of trust is formed, but the disinfectant rubbed on a child's scrape still hurts, and it takes time for the child to understand that it is nonetheless good for her. This is not because the reaction of pain is disordered – it simply reacts as it is designed to react – but because understanding comes gradually, and when it comes, its function is often to provide a broader perspective from which we see that sometimes doing the best thing requires us to do something contrary to what a part of our nature is clamoring for us to do. The emotions want what they want, but understanding helps us see what we *should* want.

This, in turn, has several effects. Most directly, it presents us with choices. I know that the disinfectant will hurt, and I don't want that; but I also know that if I do not use it, I might get infected, and I do not want that either. I know I desire my little brother's piece of cake, and that I would enjoy eating it, but I also know that taking it would be wrong and would upset him, and I do not want that. I am tempted to flirt with an attractive stranger, and expect that I would enjoy it, but I do not wish to be unfaithful and risk hurting my partner or destroying our marriage or relationship. Having conflicting motivations, I must choose between them. And the choices I make can turn into habits, and habits into character. A string of bad

choices may leave a habit so deeply engrained that I find myself no longer truly *choosing*, but doing what I know to be wrong and hating it.

Of course, having an understanding of what is good can also lead me to wish that I did not desire its opposite. I *want* something, but do not *want to want* it. One of the wonderful things about human nature is that often the cultivation of good habits, in which we do what we understand to be right even if we also want to do something else instead, can lead to a transformation of our desires themselves. The philosopher Aristotle used the word ‘continence’ for the state of doing what we understand to be right in the face of a contrary desire. This he distinguished from *virtue*, which is the state in which we desire the right thing and take enjoyment in doing it. Aristotle observed that we cultivate virtues through the practice of continence. Initially, it may be hard to eat healthy food rather than junk food or to get up from the comfortable sofa and exercise, but after practice, we come to enjoy healthy food and exercise, and indeed become disgusted by junk food and uncomfortable just lounging around all day. If we learn to practice healthy habits, however difficult it may be at first, this can lead to having healthier desires and responses as well.

But most of us find that there are limitations to this. Some good habits become second nature, our “flesh” learning to enjoy and desire things that are really good for us and for others. But sometimes it remains a lifelong struggle. The diabetic probably never truly *enjoys* injecting himself with insulin, even though he knows he needs it. The resentful person may never find it *easy* to be kind and generous. Indeed, if we are sufficiently reflective, most of us probably encounter

things at which we habitually *fail* – desires we routinely give into even though we understand them to be wrong. This is what I described as the “Romans 7 experience” in Chapter [5], in which I find myself unable to do the good I wish to do, or to resist doing the evil that I wish to avoid. I have tried, perhaps as hard as I can and for many years, and cannot be rid of it. I cannot save myself, and need God to save me.

The “renunciation of the flesh” is a name for this lifelong struggle with temptations that arise *from within us*, from something in our own disordered nature. It is a struggle that requires hard work and willpower on our part, but it is also dependent upon God’s grace to empower us to triumph over “the flesh”.

*Renunciation* of “the flesh” is a principled commitment to persist in this ongoing struggle. God’s grace not only assists us in it, but assures us of forgiveness when we fail, and also provides hope that, however long and difficult the struggle, God’s intention is in the end to bring us to perfection, even if it is fully attained only in the resurrection.

We might well ask, “Why does it have to be so long and hard?” Why doesn’t God just completely transform our natures, removing all imperfections, when we accept the free gift of salvation? This is no easy question to answer, as we cannot expect to understand all of God’s reasons. But one theme that many Christians, beginning with some of the New Testament writers themselves, have offered is by way of comparison between the spiritual life and the maturation from childhood to adulthood. Remember that the Bible describes those who accept Jesus as becoming children of God. Part of what this means is that we are, as it were, adopted by God

as members of a family and not just creatures of God. But we can also learn much about spiritual life by comparison with the maturation from childhood to adulthood.

We adults must supply all of a baby's needs. But as a child matures, it must increasingly take a role in its own maturation by making choices and working toward its goals. When parents try to do everything for their children, and do not let them start to do things for themselves, there is a risk that the children will never become mature adults. Similarly, when we begin the spiritual life, God may do remarkable things removing inner obstacles to spiritual growth. But as we progress, God requires us to take a more active role in our own growth, choosing what is good over what is easy and habitual, identifying the things that need to be changed or healed, and praying for God's assistance in changing them. Importantly, we are never on our own. God is always our heavenly Father, wishing and working for our good. Our own understanding is limited, and we are often unaware of many of the things within us that require healing and change. When it is time for us to attend to them, God reveals them through the movement of the Holy Spirit within us.

### **The Devil**

The third thing that Christians renounce in the rite of baptism is the devil. The wording differs between Christian denominations, but it is a common and very ancient part of the ritual. In the Episcopal Church, the person to be baptized renounces "Satan and all the spiritual forces that rebel against God". In the Roman Catholic Church, it is "Satan...and all his works...and all his empty promises." For the Eastern Orthodox, it is "Satan, and all his works, and all his worship, and all his

angels, and all his pomp.” (And among the Orthodox, baptism is actually preceded by three exorcisms in which demons are rebuked and cast out.)

Once we have clarified what is meant by “the world” and “the flesh”, these are notions that a modern westerner can recognize easily enough as things that indeed keep us from the love of God. But many are likely to view the devil and demons as a myth, and to regard talk of them as little more than a hold-over from a more superstitious age. (It is quite different for people in many other parts of the world, for whom the idea that the universe is filled with angels and demons is as familiar as it is to us that it is filled with protons and electrons.) Nonetheless, the idea that there are demons is impossible to avoid in the Bible. Jesus himself speaks of Satan, is tempted by Satan after his baptism, and is described as casting out demons, and he gives his disciples authority to cast them out as well. (Matthew 10:1, Mark 3:5, Luke 9:1)

The Bible tells us relatively little about just what demons are. They are described as fallen angels (Revelation 12:9), but we are told little about the nature of angels either. (The Hebrew and Greek words for angel also mean *messenger*, and in many of the passages mentioning angels in the Bible they are indeed bearing messages, so the word arguably tells us more about their role than what kinds of beings are playing that role.) Satan and the demons are presented as hostile to us. The name “Satan” literally means “Enemy”. Some are presented as taking possession of particular men and women. Satan is presented as tempting Christ in the Gospels, and many Christians have taken the view that many of our temptations to things like lust, greed, and anger are provoked by demons operating secretly.

Christians have often viewed the gods worshipped by pagan religions as really being demons, and Paul writes that “what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God”. (1 Corinthians 10:20) In the temptation of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, Satan claims to have authority over the earth and its kingdoms. (Luke 4:6) Paul describes Satan as “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and says that the struggle of Christians “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12)

It is clear from this brief list that there is a great deal of convergence between renunciation of the devil and his demons and the renunciations of the world and the flesh. If indeed there are demons that influence nations and societies and their conduct, renunciation of the fallen ways of one’s society is also renunciation of the demons that are behind them. If some of the temptations of the flesh are provoked by demons, renunciation of the ways of the flesh is also renunciation of the demons and their provocations. Many Christian denominations do recognize the phenomenon of demonic possession and have a practice of exorcism to address it, though true possession is regarded as a rare condition. There are, of course, people who actually worship the devil, such as the Church of Satan and other Satanist groups. Clearly, when their members become Christians, they must renounce their worship of the devil. And many Christians regard paganism as the worship of real beings whose true nature is demonic, and are likewise suspicious that the “spirits” that people involved in witchcraft or séances invoke are in fact demons as well.

Such practices are forbidden in their own right in both the Old and New Testaments, and Christians who have ever practiced them are expected to give them up.

For the most part, however, the Church has discouraged its members from taking too much interest in the demonic. The only Biblically-sanctioned attitude towards demons is to reject them – not in the sense of rejecting the claim that they exist, but in the sense of refusing to be tempted and telling them, in essence, to shut up and go away. Jesus indeed gave his disciples authority to cast out demons (Matthew 10:1, Mark 3:5), and some Christians believe this authority is given to all believers, at least in the sense of being able to dismiss the sources of temptations as they occur. But too much interest in the devil and his works has generally been regarded as spiritually perilous. At best, it is a distraction: the Christian's attention should be upon God and what God is doing. At worst, a fascination with evil can itself lead a person astray. Our focus is to be on what God is doing, not on what the demons are doing. Otherwise, we are filling our minds with the contemplation of evil.

### **The Nature of Renunciation**

When we renounce something, we give it up, and do so with the intention of giving it up once and for all. If an alcoholic renounces drinking, he makes it his firm intention never to take another drink. If someone renounces an odious organization she has been involved with, she commits herself to not attend their meetings, participate in their activities, or spread their views. But of course we often find ourselves slipping back into old habits and not following through on our good

intentions. If a recovering alcoholic “falls of the wagon” and takes a drink, does this mean that he did not really renounce alcohol? Not necessarily. It is, of course, possible to fool ourselves and say we are committing ourselves to something without a full and sincere intention to follow through. But even when our intentions are sincere, there are often temptations to fall back into our old ways. Renunciation involves *undertaking a commitment* about how to act in the future. The commitment can be sincere and ongoing even if we are not completely consistent in how we follow through on it. In AA, these are called “slips”, and some Christians refer to it as “backsliding”.

In the earliest years of the Church, there seems to have been an assumption that, once people had made a commitment to Christ and been baptized, they were “freed from sin”, not only in the sense that their sins had been forgiven, but in the stronger sense that they would never sin again. In fact, one of the earliest crises in the Church was over what to do when people sinned again after baptism. Had they lost their salvation forever? Did they need to be re-baptized? What the early Christians concluded was that such sins needed to be confessed and repented, but that a person’s acceptance of Christ and the grace imparted in baptism were things that needed to be done only once. A person might commit some sin afterwards and thereby be unfaithful to her commitment to Christ, but God is still faithful, eager to forgive sins and restore a state of grace.

When a person accepts Christ and renounces the world, the flesh, and the devil, her relationship with God is indeed radically transformed, and often this is accompanied by immediate and dramatic changes in character and motivation. She



may see life in a very different way, and some habitual temptations and character flaws may be removed. But we still live in fleshly bodies and inhabit a fallen world, and the demons still work against us in hidden ways. The experience of many generations of Christians has been that, while we may set our faces against the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and God's grace immediately begins to transform us into more godly men and women, the process of transformation is ongoing. Even if we do not repeat the sins that tormented us before we were saved, we come to discover that there are also other parts of our lives – our actions, our habits, our attitudes – that are fallen and sinful, and indeed had *always* been fallen and sinful even though we did not recognize it. We may not be thieves, but the commandments say that we should not even *covet* another person's possessions – that is, wish that they were our own. Jesus pointed out that, even if you have not actually committed adultery, just lusting after someone other than your spouse is itself a sin that is the mental equivalent of adultery.

It is the consistent experience of people who are serious about spiritual growth that, with each passing year, God makes them aware of additional things within them that are in need of forgiveness, healing, and transformation. In renouncing the world, the flesh, and the devil, the Christian has already *committed* herself to giving up such things as are later discovered to be sinful. The renunciations are, as it were, *blanket renunciations* of all the things that are wrong, whether we are aware of them or not. When we undertake the baptismal vows, we cannot know their full implications in advance, because the ways of the world and the flesh are so much a part of our understanding that we cannot discern what is

truly sinful. We come to greater understanding of these things gradually, as God instructs and transforms us. Christians sometimes express this by saying such things as “God is calling me to give up gossiping” (or being resentful, or whatever) or “God has shown me that my obsession with making more money is worldly.” We come to recognize that things we have always done are in fact motivated by the desires of the flesh or following the ways of the world. And as such, they fall under the broad scope of the things renounced at baptism. We were in a sense already committed to eliminating them from our lives, but only became *aware* that these particular things needed to go when we came to see them in a new light.

To use the kind of gardening metaphor that recurs in Jesus’ teachings, there is a part of sanctification that is analogous to weeding a garden. A serious gardener is committed to weeding, and removes weeds when she encounters them. But I have often spent an hour weeding a section of my garden only to notice a weed that had been right in front of me all along in a patch of dirt I thought I had already cleared, but which I had somehow failed to notice. There can also be weeds beneath the surface that remain unseen until they show themselves, and some weeds have hidden roots. Some of the most troublesome weeds in the region in which I live spread underground. I often think I have removed them when I pull up the parts I can see, but the part of the plant that is ultimately causing the problem lies hidden beneath the soil, and I discover new shoots cropping up days or weeks later. Similarly, the work of sanctification is a process that is ongoing and requires continual attention. We find new things in need of change, or we address the surface manifestation of some sin and gradually discover that it has deeper roots

that need to be uncovered. A few years of weeding may leave our spiritual garden in far better shape than it was before, but those who are serious about it have generally found that they must remain vigilant and attentive throughout their lives. It is tireless work, but it is also rewarding. Each time we remove another source of sin, we come out of it a better and freer person, a source of separation from God is removed, and we become more like Christ.

### **Love, Virtue, and Inward Transformation**

Weeding is a necessary part of gardening, but the point of the garden is not the absence of weeds but what is growing there instead. There is a band of ground between my back lawn and the parkland on which it borders that is teeming with weeds – in a sense, it is *nothing but* weeds. But it would make no sense to undertake a massive weeding project there unless I were to put something in their place. If I got rid of all the weeds, and did nothing else, I wouldn't end up with a garden, but a barren patch of dirt or a mudhole – or indeed the weeds would simply grow back.

#### **Love as the Center of Christian Sanctity**

Unfortunately, we often think about morality exclusively in terms of eliminating bad things. We focus only on the “thou shalt nots” and forget that the first and great commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, to which Jesus joined a second: “You shall love your neighbor as

yourself,” adding that “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:39-40) Indeed, the Bible tells us that

the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (1 Corinthians 13:8)

The sins we need to eliminate – hatred, jealousy, greed, pride, and the rest – need to be eliminated because they choke out love in our souls. Indeed, even other good things we might do, like serving God and preaching the Good News, are worthless without love. As Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13)

Love is described as the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22) To be sanctified is in large measure to grow in love in response to God’s love for us. Indeed, the Bible tells us that God *is* love, and the growth of love within us is the sign of God’s presence in our lives.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is

love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-11)

Love is thus both the beginning and the endpoint of sanctification. Our sanctification begins with God reaching out to us in love, and its culmination is that we become perfectly loving, indeed that we love as God loves.

The central and crowning importance of love is a truth so direct and profound that almost anyone can appreciate it. Yet it is also at risk of sounding bland and cliché. The kinds of love we hear celebrated in pop songs – whether a vague warm feeling towards our fellow human beings or the more intense and concrete love that one person feels for that particular other person – may feel like the antidote to all our woes, but we know that in practice it does not work out that way. I may love my fellow human beings in the abstract, but it is a very different thing to try to love this particular person who is pushy, quarrelsome, and irritating. One person might marry another out of an overpowering feeling of romantic love, but decades of marriage uncover all of the ways that person is difficult to love and the limitations of one's own capacity to love. If it is not a love that bears, hopes, and endures all things, life together will be very difficult; and indeed it is in the bearing, the hoping, and the endurance that what started out as a glimmering of an imperfect love is forged and polished into something stronger and finer.

Our ordinary understanding of love is, in fact, itself imperfect; and in our fallen state, our loves are even distorted. Indeed, many of our inclinations to sin are

manifestations of love in twisted and stunted forms. We easily mistake lust for love, and in a sense lust has at its core a glimmering of love – a response to something fine in another person – but one that is distorted by the clouded lens of self-serving desire. Real love not only appreciates but seeks to bring about the true good of the other; lust seeks to use the other to fulfill one's own desires. Our appetites draw us to things they present as good for us, and wanting the things that are *truly* good for us is a proper kind of self-love. But the appetites often present us with a distorted view of what is really good for us, and seldom take any account of what is good for others. When we are angry, or we despise or hate another person, it is often because they have in fact done some harm to us or to someone we care about, or because they have some flaw in their character. A perfect love recognizes faults and transgressions and is pained by them, but ultimately desires the other person's salvation and healing; in anger or hatred, we may wish them harm instead. When we are hurt, disillusioned, or bitter, it is often because we have been disappointed in what we desired out of love. In order for perfect love to flourish, it is often its imperfect and distorted expressions that must either be transfigured or else rooted out so that something better and finer may grow in their place.

So, while Christians believe that love is both the divine activity that moves the soul towards sanctity and also, in its perfect form, the culmination of growth into that sanctity, we cannot get very far in either our understanding of sanctification or our progress in it by using the dim and distorted understandings of love that we start out with. Love appreciates the value and the potential in another (and indeed in oneself) and seeks his or her true good. But we do not know what

will truly be good for another person, or even for ourselves; and our appreciation and care for the value and potential of people – both ourselves and others – is often dim or painted over with our more immediate fears and desires. In order for us to truly love, both our hearts and minds must be changed.

### **The Love of God**

How does this begin? For Christians, it often begins in reflection upon the saving love that comes from God which brought about our own salvation in the first place. As John writes,

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

It is perhaps here that the distinctive and scandalous feature of the Christian message – that Jesus was willing to die that I might be saved – is at its most powerful. In it we see what love is in the most powerful terms the human mind can appreciate: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Think for a moment about the idea of someone laying down his life for you. The feeling it inspires is so moving that it is almost more than we can bear. Not only does it show us something about the depths of love and about the person who performed the act, it also shows us something about ourselves in a new light: how precious *we* must be in the eyes of the one who did it. Someone who is willing to lay down his life for you must love you very much, perhaps far better than you have ever loved yourself. And in this we are given a glimpse of something at once wonderful and daunting: the possibility of seeing ourselves as God sees us, as beings

of immeasurable value and worthy of infinite love. In one sense, our conception of ourselves may be unduly inflated: we overestimate our importance in relation to others and see the history of the world as though we were its central character. But in another sense, the problem may be precisely the opposite: our conception of our own worth is too small. It is only when we see ourselves through the love of another – and preeminently through the love of God – that we can see how precious each of us truly is.

The “each of us”, of course, is a second crucial point. God created you out of love, and Jesus would have died on the cross for you even if you were the only person who needed to be saved. (This is the gist of Jesus’ parable of the shepherd who seeks a single lost sheep in Luke 15:3-6.) But he did *not* die for you alone. He died for each and every one of the billions of human beings who have ever lived. He sees the same infinite value in each of them that he sees in you, and loves each of them with the same infinite love. If he feels every pain that you have endured, he feels theirs as well – including the pains that you may have inflicted and those you could have alleviated but did not. If we do not see others as God sees them, or love them as God loves them, this only shows how much our love needs to grow if it is to become like the love of God. Of course, none of us will or can know and love others *exactly* as God knows and loves them. We cannot know billions of people, nor can we know every detail of the life of even a single individual. But Christians do believe that we can come to love those we are given to love more and more as God does, because it is God’s love that is at work in us.



How does our progress towards this awesome goal begin? Often it begins, not directly in loving others, but in the love we form towards God in response to his love for us. Jesus' disciples responded to the love they saw in him by loving him and following him. It was only later that Jesus saw fit to give them a new commandment: to love one another as he loved them. (John 13:34) And the love of God and Jesus is not merely a means to the end of loving other people. Love is a relationship, and it is out of our relationship with God in Christ that both we ourselves and our relationships with others are transformed. The branches of the vine are ultimately related to one another through their mutual relationship to the vine.

How does our love of God lead us into greater love and sanctity? Jesus said

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (John 14:15-17)

In this passage, we see two crucial components of the process of sanctification:

*keeping the commandments* and *being filled with the Holy Spirit*, which transforms us from within. We have already spoken at several points about the distinctive Christian idea that God sends his own Spirit to dwell within those who receive him, and it is a central tenet of Christian belief that it is through the indwelling of the Spirit that we are led to grow into the image and likeness of Christ. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit often leads and prompts them from within. This takes place within each individual in its own ways which we are each left to discover in our own individual relationships with God.

**Keeping God's Commandments**

But God has also spoken to everyone through the commandments – both through the Law and through the instructions and admonitions that Jesus gave. It is tempting to think of God's commandments as something alien and odious – as stern orders preventing us from doing what we want to do. But to think of them in this way is to think like a child who does not understand that its parents' rules are (assuming the parents are wise and good) for its instruction and protection. The purpose of the commandments is to instruct and protect us. As Psalm 19 says:

The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the Lord are sure,  
making wise the simple;  
  
the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;  
  
the fear of the Lord is pure,  
enduring forever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults. (Psalm 19:7-12)

If one of the things that keeps us from loving as we ought is a lack of understanding of what is truly right and good, the purpose of the commandments is to increase our understanding and, in the meantime, to instruct us in what to do and to warn us about what mistakes to avoid. Love may be the fulfillment of the commandments, and obedience to the Law as a set of external commandments is eventually to be replaced by the “law of love”; but so long as our love is not yet perfect, we are in need, as it were, of moral braces until we can walk straight and upright on our own. One of the ways we learn about what is right and what is wrong is by reading or hearing what God has already said on the subject, in the Law and in the teachings of Jesus. This is one reason Christians consider it important to read and study the Bible – both Old Testament and New. And of course it is important not only to *learn* what God has said to do and what to avoid, but to *obey*. Like the commandments themselves, obedience has gotten something of a bad name, because we often think of it in terms of one person imposing his will upon another. But if the commandments really teach us what is right and wrong, obedience takes on a different flavor. It is a way of avoiding doing what is wrong when we lack understanding or want to do something else.

We do many foolish things that we later sorely regret, and often they are things that we could have avoided had we known, remembered, and observed Biblical commandments. Sometimes we err because we do not understand what the consequences of our actions will be. Perhaps I do not know that telling what seems like a convenient lie will end a trusting friendship or ruin my reputation. Some people seem even to be unaware that much more serious sins such as marital

infidelity will cause grievous harm to themselves and to those around them. But if I know that God has commanded me not to lie or commit adultery, and I am resolved to keep the commandments, I can avoid the sins and the anguish they would cause even if I do not understand *why* they are to be avoided. Moreover, even if I do understand why they would be wrong – or at least understand it in my better moments, which are generally not the moments in which I am tempted to do them – observing the commandments gives me a second line of defense against temptation. I may think I can fool you with a lie, and may also believe that *this* lie is harmless; but if I also believe that God has forbidden it, and I care about what God thinks even if I do not care about what you think, that may be enough to keep me honest. (After all, even if you do not know, God will surely know.) It would surely be a better thing if I were already the type of person who told you the truth out of love and respect for you as well. But if I am not yet that type of person, the commandments can help shape my conduct so that I do the right thing nonetheless; and in the long run, this may teach me the love and respect I that I lack.

There are, of course, *positive* commandments as well – things to *do* rather than to avoid doing. For example, Christians are commanded to visit the sick, to give to those in need, to forgive others, to love our enemies, and to share the Good News. These are often things that we do not have much inclination to do on our own, and many Christians begin doing them only because they believe God has commanded them to do so. But it is precisely in doing such things that we grow in love – and, moreover, it is in doing such things that our actions show others how God’s love is at

work in us, leading us to do things we would not do on our own initiative or by our own inclinations.

### **The Cultivation of Virtue**

How do the commandments contribute to our becoming holier men and women? When we observe the commandments – doing things that may not come naturally to us but which we feel commanded to do and avoiding doing things that our fallen natures tempt us to do – something else begins to happen. What we do repeatedly, even if it is first done only out of obedience, becomes *habit*, and as such, begins to become a part of who we are. The commandments help to transform us by breaking old bad habits and encouraging new ones that are beneficial. And, in time, habit takes root and becomes part of our *character*. At first I might give of my time and money to help people in need only because I believe God has commanded it, and each time I do it, it might be a struggle. After a time, it becomes habit – it is simply *what I do*, and I do it effortlessly. After a bit more time, I may find that I have become the sort of person who takes a genuine and heartfelt interest in the well-being of others and actively seeks opportunities to be of service. It seems to be a deep fact about human psychology that what we do repeatedly tends to shape who we are in our innermost being. Outward behavior shapes our inner character. Wise parents know this and encourage their children to practice good habits, and it is an important principle in the moral and spiritual growth of adults as well. Keeping the commandments is one way that we learn what God would have us do, and in the process of doing it, we are gradually transformed into a different kind of person.

### **The Imitation of Christ**

Another way that we are transformed is through following Christ's example and becoming imitators of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1, Ephesians 5:1-2) The commandments may tell us particular things to do and to avoid, but the only way to see how a truly good human being lives and behaves is through observation. Many wise people have observed the importance of associating with good people and having good role models. But Christians believe that there was only one person who lived a *perfectly* good human life: Jesus. As a consequence, they have looked to the Gospels to study the example of how Jesus lived and to try to be more like him by imitating how he lived. Of course, being "imitators of Christ" does not mean things like growing a beard and wearing first-century Jewish clothing. It means trying to see how Jesus interacted with other people and with the Father, and attempting to do likewise. In recent years, there has been something of a fad of wearing a bracelet with the letters "WWJD", standing for "What would Jesus do?" To some it may sound a bit quaint, but it is a worthy question to ask oneself in challenging situations. There are, to be sure, things that Jesus did that we cannot – I cannot, for example, turn water into wine if the wine runs out at a wedding reception or get across the lake by walking on water. I cannot restore sight to a blind person. (Though many Christians believe that God still does sometimes work miracles through prayer.) But if I meet up with someone whom everyone else despises because he is poor, or sick, or mentally ill, or a foreigner, or is known to have committed some notorious sin, I can very well think about how Jesus treated such people in the Gospels and try to do likewise. And if I see people who seem "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a

shepherd” (Matthew 9:36), I can, like Jesus, have compassion on them and share the Good News. In so doing, I not only *act* more like Jesus on this particular occasion, but also *become* more like him in a way that leaves me transformed.

This last example – of proclaiming the Good News through both word and deed – is itself an important component of sanctification. Jesus did not just proclaim the Good News, he instructed his followers to proclaim it as well. For many Christians I know, this is the hardest part of the Christian life. We are uncomfortable sharing our faith with others, whether out of a fear of offending them or a worry that we might look ridiculous. But there is no escaping the fact that the Great Commission to spread the Good News is the primary job that Jesus left to his followers, and it is only in fulfilling it that Christians fully participate in God’s work of reconciling the world to himself. Moreover, if Jesus came to proclaim the Good News, one cannot truly be like him unless one shares it with others.

### **The Incompleteness of our Sanctification and of Our Understanding of It**

No characterization of Christian sanctification can be fully complete. Christians believe that it is a process that involves the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the correction of the ways our nature has been distorted by the fall, and transformation into the image and likeness of Christ. But just what these things mean is not fully visible to us, nor do we even know what their ultimate completion will look like. As John writes

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see

him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.  
(1 John 3:2-3)

We can see what the end result of sanctification will be like only to the extent that we can rightly see Jesus, and indeed it is somehow *through* beholding him that we can be transformed. What we can see more concretely in the meantime are steps in the process of sanctification: the elimination of sin and the causes of sin from our lives, keeping God's commandments, imitation of Christ, the cultivation of virtue, and through it all, a growth in love. Christians have, over the years, developed a number of *practices* that are thought to be helpful in the process of sanctification. It is to these I shall turn in [the next chapter].



## 9

**Christian Practices**

This chapter is not so much about what Christians *believe* as about things Christians *do*. Of course, Christians do many of the same things as anyone else – they wake up and eat breakfast in the morning, they work and have families, in much the same variety of ways as other people. And there are many things that different Christians do differently from one another. Some like a good roast and a glass of wine to go along with it, others are vegetarians or teetotalers. Some dress for church in their “Sunday best” while others choose to wear plain and modest clothing. Some enjoy classical music and others rock and roll. Some like the hustle and bustle of crowds, and others prefer a private and secluded life. Some of these may be the result of individual decisions about how best to live out their lives *as Christians*, but many are simply the usual ways that one person is different from another.

There are, however, things that Christians do that are quite closely tied to their faith. Some of these are things they do collectively as part of the life of the Church, such as public worship and baptism. Others – like doing good works, cultivating the virtues, and financial giving – are things that Christians believe to be important components of the lives they are called to live as disciples of Jesus. While

the Church endorses Biblical teachings on the importance of these, just how those teachings are to be applied is often worked out in very individual ways. And some Christian practices, like prayer and reading the Bible, are performed both individually and collectively.

A chapter discussing Christian *practices* might seem at least mildly tangential to the topic of what Christians *believe*. I have decided to include it for two reasons. The first is that one of the purposes of this book is to try to help readers who are curious about Christianity to better understand their Christian friends and neighbors. If you are such a person, you might well have wondered such things as what your Christian acquaintances do at church on Sundays, what they are talking about when they mention things such as prayer and communion, why some of them fast in the period before Easter, or what impact being a Christian has on the rest of their lives. It might be uncomfortable to ask *them*, though if you did, you might find that many of them are delighted to talk about it, and I quite encourage you to do so. I cannot touch on everything here – and indeed what “everything” amounts to might differ considerably between two Christians – but I can at least provide some guideposts.

The second reason is that what Christians *do as Christians* is often closely related to their distinctively Christian *beliefs*. As I have said before, while certain beliefs are centrally important to Christianity, being a Christian is ultimately a way of *living in relationship with God*. How we live involves what we do as well as what we believe, and indeed a life in which a person’s beliefs are not lived out in her actions is a life that is at odds with itself. So I hope, in the course of this chapter, not

only to *describe* certain Christian practices, but also to help the reader understand how they fit together with Christian beliefs in ways that together make up a way of living. I am a Christian and I also play the cello. I am a Christian and I pray, but I would not say “I am a Christian *and I also* pray.” Rather, I am a Christian *and therefore* I pray (even if it is not *only* Christians who pray). Similar things can be said about some of the other practices we will discuss – public worship, the sacraments, reading the Bible, fasting, and the cultivation of Christian virtues – but it is prayer that we will begin.

## Prayer

Christians speak of believing in a *personal God*. They don’t mean this in the sense in which we speak of each person having a personal toothbrush or a personal opinion – where the whole point is that mine is different from yours. If I say “this is my personal toothbrush”, what I mean is that it *belongs exclusively to me*. I very much hope that you have a toothbrush as well, but please do not attempt to use mine. When we speak of a “personal God”, however, the word ‘personal’ means something quite different: it means a God *who is a person* – not an impersonal power of nature or an abstract force, but a being that can think and enter into relationships with other persons. I believe in a God who is a person, but do not regard him as *my own personal God*. Christians all believe in and worship the same God, but in each case it is a *personal relationship*.

Being a Christian is, as much as anything else, a matter of having a personal relationship with God. By this, I do not mean to equate the two. Many of the figures presented in the Old Testament are vividly depicted as having personal relationships with God, but none of them were *Christians*, for the simple reason that Jesus had not yet been born. They talked to God, heard God, asked questions, besought God to do things for themselves and others, poured out their hearts to God, and sometimes even argued with him. This has remained a common feature of Jewish practice through the centuries. Perhaps some of the ancient Greeks and Romans spoke to the gods they believed in as well. Christians are not unique in thinking of their relationship to God in terms of *personal* relationship. But Christians do believe that God is a person [technically, three persons], as we shall discuss in Chapter [10], and a Christian who does not *relate to* God as a person is not really putting what she believes into practice.

How do we relate to other people? We spend time in their company, we reveal ourselves to one another, we do things together, and perhaps most importantly, we *communicate*. When the other person in the relationship is God, all of this, and certainly the communicative parts, can fall under the general heading of *prayer*. For people who do not have a lot of experience with prayer, this might come as a bit of a surprise. Often, when we think of prayer, we think of something more specific. We might, for example, think of prayer solely in terms of *asking* God for something: “God, please help me to do well in this job interview,” “Please heal and comfort my mother,” “Lord, please forgive me.” These are indeed prayers, but they are particular *types* of prayer, sometimes called “petition” (asking something for

oneself) and “intercession” (asking something for someone else). Alternatively, we might think of reciting the formal prayers that we find printed in books, like the one called “The Lord’s Prayer” – a prayer Jesus taught to his disciples, which is recited collectively at many Christian worship services. I shall include this prayer here, even though it is already familiar to many, both because it is such an important prayer for Christians and in order to refer to parts of it in what follows. (I use the version from Matthew’s Gospel in the King James translation, which will be the most familiar.)

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

This and other prayers that are commonly recited are indeed “prayers” in a sense, just as a piece of poetry printed on a page is a poem. But it is only truly an *act* of prayer if one is really *praying* it – which is to say, using the words as one’s own personal communication with God. If you are just reciting the words, you may not be truly *praying* them, even though you are in some sense “reciting a prayer”, just as you can recite a line of a poem, like “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways” without actually proclaiming your love for the person you are reciting it to. (Indeed, you can do it all alone without it being addressed to anyone at all.)

### **Petition and Intercession**

The most familiar types of prayer – petition and intercession – are indeed important practices for Christians. The Bible indeed encourages us to ask God for the things we need (Matthew 7:7-11) and to pray for the needs of others (1 Timothy 2:1), and suggests that, at least sometimes, if we did not receive what we need, it is because we did not ask. (James 4:2-3) This is, in a way, a puzzling thing. After all, Christians believe that God knows what we need whether we ask it or not, and also that God is like a good father who wants his children to have what they need. (Note that this does not imply that God always desires that people obtain what they *want*, because what we want is not always good for us.) And they believe that God often acts for our good even when we do not ask, or even know what to ask. Prayer, however, brings at least a small portion of God's activity into the sphere of personal relationship – and, conversely, brings us into the sphere of God's work in the world through our relationship with him.

Suppose that you are visiting a friend at her home and you are thirsty. You know she would not begrudge you a glass of water, and you are perfectly capable of getting it for yourself. But *asking* for a glass of water is the right thing to do in the context of the relationship: it acknowledges her prerogatives over the things in her household, and it yields to her a role in fulfilling your needs. Indeed, it sometimes presents opportunities for her to give something better than you asked – she might offer other choices of drink that, upon reflection, you might prefer, or ask whether you are perhaps hungry as well. It is not simply a matter of following meaningless rules of etiquette; it is an act in which the fulfillment of a simple biological need is

elevated into something nobler – one person having the opportunity to do something for another – by being brought into the life of a relationship. In doing so, it also respects the relationship and both of the people involved. With a close friend, it might be understood that you are permitted to open the cabinet, take a glass, and fill it for yourself. But this too is a matter of permission and privilege. To do so in the house of a stranger is not only rude, it is a violation, however trifling, of the homeowner's rights over her household.

Or suppose that there has been a snow storm, and the elderly woman down the road cannot clear her own walk and driveway. Another neighbor has a snow blower and you go to him, shovel in hand, and suggest that together you dig her out. Perhaps he was planning to do that very thing in any case and will be doing the bulk of the clearing even with your help. But in going and asking his help, it becomes a joint activity – perhaps one that deepens your relationship with him in the process – that goes beyond the simple practical end of removing the snow.

When we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” – that is, the basic necessities we will require throughout the day – we make the simplest parts of everyday life a part of our relationship with God. Of course, in calling them “the simplest parts of everyday life” I speak from the perspective of someone for whom the question of whether I would have something to eat and drink has never been in doubt. For millions of people around the world, and even some in my own town, this is not the case. For them, the prayer is urgent and heartfelt. And indeed, upon reflection, my own access to a ready supply of the basic necessities is dependent upon a vast chain of factors that are far beyond my control: the existence of markets,

distributors, farmers, water workers, highways, electricity, rain to fill the reservoirs and make the crops grow, the absence of famine and war. As people living in areas that are currently experiencing drought and famine for the first time in memory are discovering, we easily take for granted things that are by no means assured, and for which we often learn to be grateful only once we have experienced their absence. The practice of asking God even for the things we can reasonably expect to receive in due course can thus also serve to remind us that the ability to satisfy even our most basic needs in fact depends on a great deal that is outside our control, and also that there are others who are not as fortunate as we might be at the moment. This, in turn, may lead me to pray – and to act – for others in ways that might never have occurred to me had I not begun with a simple (and otherwise apparently unnecessary) prayer for my own daily needs. Prayer thus leads us into a love with greater scope and efficacy – a love that is more like, and indeed is a part of, God's love.

Christians believe in principle that prayer can be effective. But we can seldom be certain about its effects in any single case. On the one hand, we know, both from experience and from the witness of Scripture, that not everything we pray for happens. To think that praying for something will automatically produce the desired result is to mistake prayer for some fanciful magic in which we exercise the kind of power that only God truly possesses, or to suppose that by praying we can coerce God into doing what we desire. But just *why* one prayer seems to be answered and another does is a question we can seldom answer with any surety. I have sometimes heard it said, "God always answers prayer. It's just that sometimes



the answer is *no*.” (Or, in some cases, *not yet*.) A more sophisticated way of saying the same thing is to say that Christians believe that God wants, and is willing to do, what is *truly good* for us, and that may be something quite different from what we ask for. At every major junction of my life, what I *got* was something different from what I thought I wanted at the time; and in many cases I can see clearly in retrospect that, had I received exactly what I asked for, it would not have been as good for me as what I actually got. It is perhaps for this reason that every prayer should, at least implicitly, include “*thy will be done*.”

But I have a hard time believing that the same kind of reasons are at work when a mother’s prayer for food for her starving child are not fulfilled. There, I fear, the explanation often has to do with what human beings do and fail to do, and not with God’s inaction. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen convincingly argued that famine – at least *modern* famine – is not a result of there being too little food in the world, but in how it is distributed. The world today produces more than enough food to feed all of its inhabitants, and it is possible to get things from one part of the globe to another in a surprisingly short time. But there is no profit to be made in shipping food to the poorest places in the world, where it is most needed. And when charitable organizations get it there through the generosity of people in other parts of the world, it is often hoarded by warlords while the people starve. In our age, at least, famine is due principally to the wickedness and hardness of heart of human beings, and, like it or not, God still grants men and women the free will to do evil. This, too, calls for prayer – both for the needs of those who suffer evil at the hands of others, and for those who do evil to be called to repentance and change of

life. Thus Jesus calls upon his followers to pray even for their enemies (Matthew 5:44) and for the corrupt rulers of this age (1 Timothy 2:2).

On the other hand, when our prayers *are* answered, we do not really know what role our praying played in the outcome. If I pray for someone who is sick and she is healed, I do not know whether God worked a miracle or whether it came about through medical treatment or natural processes (which are, of course, themselves ultimately God's handiwork as well). If I had not prayed for her, would she still be ill, or perhaps even have died from her illness? We are never in a position to know this for certain. What I do know is this: in praying for her, I have had the privilege of being a part of God's work of healing in this particular person's life, something that she and I and God went through together. Perhaps I was little more than a sympathetic bystander. Perhaps my prayers played an instrumental role. But if they did, I must remember that it was only a *minor* role nonetheless: it was God, and not I, who did the healing. Christians do believe in healing and miracles, but they do not believe that the people who pray for these things have miraculous powers of their own. It is always God who does the work, even if sometimes he does not do so unless we ask.

### **Thanksgiving**

If petitions (for oneself) and intercessions (for others) are the most familiar types of prayer, they are not the only types, any more than our verbal interactions with other human beings are confined to asking them to do things. Human giving and receiving may be preceded by *asking* (petition), but they are properly followed

by *thanking* the giver. Christians also try to make it a practice to thank God for everything they have received from him – not only the things that are answers to specific prayers, but also those that come unasked for. To take a familiar example, many Christians give a prayer of thanks before eating a meal. Some thank God for the opportunities each new day presents in their morning prayers, and for the blessings that have happened during the day in their bedtime prayers. Sometimes such prayer comes quite naturally and spontaneously – a person who narrowly avoids death or injury may well give God sincere and hearty thanks. But thanksgiving – as this form of prayer is called – is actually surprisingly hard to cultivate. *Giving* thanks may be easy when we are *feeling* thankful, and we often feel naturally thankful in the moments immediately after we receive something we had wanted or escape something we had feared. But it is remarkable how quickly that feeling passes, regardless of whether we have received it from God or from another person. In our interactions with one another, it certainly often seems to pass before we have written a thank-you note to a person who has given us a gift! Indeed, as any parent knows, a child may be so engrossed in her enjoyment of the gift that the thought that it is a gift *from someone* – someone who had taken the time to give some thought to what the child would like to have and took the time and effort to procure and confer it – never enters her mind. And, once a few days or even minutes have passed, she may have come so to take what she received for granted that she is unlikely to stop and give thanks. And, to be honest, many of us adults never properly learned to give thanks to those who have done something for us, or if we did learn to do it, we do not always practice it as we should.

God's gifts are not always obvious. Indeed, Christians believe that all that we receive is ultimately a gift from God (James 1:17), though it may be a gift from another human being or a result of our own hard work as well. I may have put in many backbreaking hours plowing a field, planting seeds, removing weeds, and harvesting the produce, but I did not provide the rain, the sunlight, or the soil. I created neither the seeds nor the healthy body that allowed me to do all of that labor. A remarkable portion of the Bible and the prayers found in prayerbooks consists of thanksgivings. To be perfectly honest, if all of *my* prayers had been written down in a book, I fear I might look somewhat of an ingrate by contrast. Like a child opening birthday presents, I indeed take pleasure when something good comes my way, but I also tend to pass on to the next thing without stopping to give thanks to God. Perhaps some people are thankful by disposition, but – while I was never the kind of person who *resents* the giver – for me, being thankful is something I have to work at by reminding myself to give thanks. Here, again, we find something where practice leads to habit, and habit produces character. And in the case of thanksgiving, the practice, the habit, and a thankful character are all *enjoyable*. Thankful people tend to be joyous people. Indeed, my own experience is that when (often only after a necessary self-reminder) I stop to give thanks, not only does it give God the respect due him, it also gives me a sense of joy and peace.

### **Oblation**

Yet another type of prayer is expressed in that verse already alluded to in the Lord's Prayer that says "thy will be done". This type of prayer, in which we submit

our own will to God's will, is referred to as *oblation*. 'Oblate' means "flat", and to oblate oneself means "to lay oneself out flat" – to prostrate oneself, like a person stretching himself out on the ground as a sign of submission in the presence of a king. Some Christians actually pray in this position – which is itself called "oblation" or "prostration" – as opposed (or in addition) to standing, kneeling or sitting. (This prayer posture is commonly used by Eastern Christians, and also by some of the monastic orders in the West.) But what is crucial to the form of *prayer* called "oblation" is not the posture in which it is done, but the inner attitude of yielding one's own will and desires in preference to having God's will be done.

Giving up our own wills and desires in favor of seeking God's will is indeed at the very core of the Christian life. It is the essential change that makes it possible to put ourselves into God's hands and receive the free gift of salvation in the first place. And much of the process of sanctification unfolds as we successively yield each part of our life that is still disfigured by the fall. Much of what we desire is a consequence of our fallen nature. And even to the extent that a person has been transformed into the image and likeness of Christ, our understanding is still woefully incomplete compared with God's knowledge. Immediately after Peter proclaimed that Jesus was "the Christ, the son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), he rejected Jesus' announcement that he must suffer at the hands of men and be put to death. Peter's insight that Jesus was the Messiah had, by Jesus' own acknowledgement, been revealed by God. Knowing this about Jesus, Peter neither desired Jesus to be put to death nor believed that this could be God's intention. But God's plan was bigger than Peter's understanding.

Generations of Christians have found that, as we begin to understand bits and pieces of who God is and what God desires, there can be a temptation to think we know it all, and place too much confidence in our own beliefs. This is the sin of *spiritual pride*. Practicing prayer of oblation is an important antidote to this condition and the temptation to it. In it, we recognize and affirm not only that some of our desires may be products of our fallen and sinful nature, but also that *even our best* understanding of the good still falls short of the totality of what God knows and wills. We should indeed pray for what is good as best we understand it; but we must also be prepared to yield even our best understanding of the good if God's will is for something even better which we do not yet understand, or which exceeds human understanding altogether.

### **Praise**

If thanksgiving is the proper response to receiving what we have asked for (and sometimes for blessings that we did not even ask for), oblation also naturally leads to another form of prayer: *praise*. Praise is the expression of wonder at God's greatness and goodness. The Bible, and particularly the Book of Psalms, is filled with the praise of God. Indeed, in the several parts of the Bible that report visions of heaven, the primary activity of the angels in the presence of God seems to be praise! The most genuine form of praise comes as a spontaneous reaction to a recognition of the grandeur of God or something he has done. When we behold the scope and awesome beauty of the world God has made, or think upon his immeasurable love,

we are overcome by a sense of awesome wonder. Carl Boberg's well-known hymn,

"How Great Thou Art" expresses the experience well:

O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder,  
Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made;  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Refrain:

Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,  
How great Thou art, How great Thou art.  
Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,  
How great Thou art, How great Thou art!

Refrain

When through the woods, and forest glades I wander,  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees.  
When I look down, from lofty mountain grandeur  
And see the brook, and feel the gentle breeze.

Refrain

And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing;  
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;  
That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died to take away my sin.

Refrain

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation,  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.  
Then I shall bow, in humble adoration,  
And then proclaim: "My God, how great Thou art!"

Refrain

## **Adoration**

If prayer is a form of communication in a relationship, there are many forms of such communication, expressing different things and suited to different occasions. But even in human relationships, some of the most important communication takes

place without words. A child nestled in its mother's arms looks into her eyes in love. The child falls and skins a knee and looks up at its mother in tears. An old man tenderly holds his dying wife's hand. Or two people look at one another unspeaking but merely basking in one another's presence. There is also a form of prayer in which we merely abide in the presence of God, contemplating him in love and reverence. This is what is known as *adoration*. Many Christian writers have felt that it is in adoration that we come closest to what the angels experience in God's presence and what we ourselves will experience when we are raised from the dead: gazing upon the face of God in loving wonder that words cannot express, and thereby being transformed most fully into his image and likeness.

### **Praying Together**

Thus far, we have been speaking about prayer as something Christians do as individuals. But prayer is also something that Christians do *together*. Christians pray for one another and pray together for the world. One of the things I do in my church is to serve on a team of people who are available to pray with other people. Sometimes people come to pray about their own needs, especially for healing. Sometimes they come to pray together about the needs of other people they know: family members, friends, people at their workplaces. I have seen many prayers answered, but in the majority of cases I never find out what happened, and indeed I do not hold on to the memory of what people prayed for, as often what is shared is of a private nature. But what is perhaps more remarkable is how often people arise from their knees visibly moved and changed by the experience of being prayed for.



Often I see a profound sense of relief and release. Sometimes it is a confidence that God will grant what they asked for, but I think that more often it is a more fundamental change in their attitude. What had been a private burden has now been shared, and ultimately has been turned over to God in the trust that, whatever happens, we are in his loving hands.

The experience can be equally profound for those of us who have had the privilege of sharing in the prayers of others and holding up their needs before God. For me, these are often the times I feel closest to God. Indeed, there are moments in prayer ministry when I feel as though the boundaries between myself and God and the other person have become a bit blurry. Occasionally, I have felt an absolute certainty that God wants me to say *this particular thing* to the person I am praying with. Sometimes it makes no sense to me until I hear the other person's reaction to it and see that it spoke directly to something that only God knew about. It is in these moments that I think I understand most clearly the notion that Christ lives in me and the Holy Spirit works within me. I spoke the words, but it does not seem that they came from me. I was merely, for a moment, a transparent lens through which the light of God could shine.

Finally, Christians also pray collectively, in church services and prayer meetings. I shall turn to this in [the next section].

## Meeting Together and Public Worship

From the earliest times, Christians would gather to meet with one another on “the Lord’s Day” – what we call Sunday, the day of the week on which the Gospels report that Jesus rose from the dead. In the Jewish calendar, this was the *first* day of the week, the day after the Jewish Sabbath, which is why Jews worship on Saturday and Christians on Sunday. They met to pray and sing, to hear the Good News proclaimed and explained, and to worship God. No doubt, in those early years in which Christians were targets of persecution, they also took a good deal of comfort and encouragement from the company of fellow believers. (Christians under persecution would generally have been secretive about their gatherings, and so their worship, while *collective*, was not truly *public*.) There were no doubt other occasions on which Christians met together in groups as well, as it is clear from the letters of the New Testament and the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians in the various towns in which they lived became tight-knit communities, taking care of one another’s needs and working together to support the work of proclamation of the Good News.

One finds many of the same elements in Christian worship through the ages and around the world. Christians in almost every denomination meet, if possible, on Sunday to worship, pray, and sing, to hear the Bible read, to teach and be taught. I shall say more **in the next chapter** about how contemporary Christianity has a bewildering variety of traditions and forms of worship. If you happen to live in a large cosmopolitan area, there may well be hundreds of churches from dozens of

traditions nearby, and if you were to visit several of them (almost all churches welcome visitors) you would find quite a broad spectrum of forms of worship. At a Catholic or Episcopal church, you would encounter a fairly formal service whose central focus is participation in the body and blood of Christ through bread and wine, the sermon would likely be short, and the music might vary from hymns from the past four hundred years to contemporary settings, or perhaps even Gregorian chant from the middle ages if the services were held at a convent or monastery. At an Orthodox church, the service would be equally formal but different, and if it was a congregation with a specific ethnic identity, it might take place in another language such Greek or Old Church Slavonic and the music would be in the modalities of the countries from which their ancestors emigrated. In a Lutheran or Calvinist church, you might expect a much longer sermon (though not the multi-hour sermons that were popular in Germany in the sixteenth century!), along with hymns (perhaps some by Luther himself) sung in four-part harmony. In some Evangelical churches, you might find contemporary music played on drums and electric guitars, the service focused upon singing and a long sermon, and the communion of bread and wine included only infrequently. At a Pentecostal church, you might hear people speaking in tongues as on the day of Pentecost in Acts, and the preacher laying hands on sick people to heal them. Today, it is possible to find forms of Christian worship to suit almost anyone's tastes and sensibilities.

But in spite of the surface differences in the *forms* of worship, there are things you would find in common in most or all such services. In Christian churches, people pray, sing, and hear the word of God together, and in most cases they receive

instruction on what they hear in the form of a sermon. They also observe the remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection by sharing in bread and wine, which Jesus described at the last supper as his body and blood – some do so every week, and others less frequently. Many churches also have different types of meetings and worship on other days of the week: a midweek prayer meeting, or services of prayer every day in the morning and evening, or special services devoted to healing the sick or evangelism. And most churches also have groups within them that meet together for special ministries they perform, such as feeding the poor, visiting shut-ins, or teaching children.

Christians have always felt that there is something indispensable about the regular experience of meeting with one another and worshipping God *together*. During my lifetime, my own culture has become increasingly individualistic, and even many Christians may feel that they do not have to go to church to be close to God, or that they can experience a church service (perhaps better-executed and with a star preacher and professional quality music) on their televisions or streamed into their computers or smartphones. Until sometime in the twentieth century, the only way anyone had of participating in a religious service was to be in a room with other people, but times have changed. So if we are saved individually, why do Christians find it important to meet and worship *together*?

One reason is that it is encouraged in the Bible itself.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

It is interesting that this verse does not simply encourage Christians to meet together regularly. It also provides *reasons*, and these reasons go beyond the church service itself. Meeting together provides encouragement and motivation to love and perform good deeds. It may be difficult to understand how it is *encouraging* or why such encouragement is important unless you have had the experience of being a Christian in a non-Christian world. Christians try to live in relationship with God and to live a life shaped by their beliefs and ideals. But it is very difficult to do this in isolation, and the more so if the people around us have very different beliefs and ideals. The human mind seems heavily inclined to take on the practices and habits of the people around us – what Christians call “the world”. If your job treats employees as cogs in a machine and encourages you to treat customers as sources of revenue to be exploited, or your neighbors think of people in other parts of the world as enemies to be hated and ridiculed, or your friends believe life is meaningless and there is no loving God, it is difficult to keep these ideas from seeping into your mind as well. You may well go home at the end of the day finding these foreign thoughts lurking in your own mind as well, even if they are not the beliefs you *embrace*, and you may feel your own beliefs are unwelcome and subjects of ridicule if you try to express such thoughts as that all people are of intrinsic value, that we should love our enemies, or that God loves us. You may well come home feeling as though your spirit has been muddled by the words, actions, and ideas that you have had to wade through over the course of the week. There is no antidote for this quite like being in the presence of a room full of people who share one’s beliefs

and values. It helps remind and reinforce our sense of who we are, and also a sense that this is *who we should be*.

It is, of course, possible to take this too far, to shut ourselves off from people with different beliefs and ways of living so that our own are never challenged. Some churches indeed become insular in this way, and it is particularly bad when communities self-select and become exclusive around things that have nothing to do with, or are even contrary to the Christian gospel, such as race, social class, or political leanings. A church should equally welcome anyone who believes in Jesus and seeks to follow him, and it is healthy for a church community to include people with a variety of backgrounds, life situations, spiritual experience, and political views. A Christian community that is too self-selecting in these things is at risk of becoming a club rather than a church, and one that *enforces* conformity is somewhere on the road to becoming a cult.

On the other hand, this is not to say that healthy church congregations are all the same or that churches should strive to be *generic*. Both denominations and the local congregations that make them up cannot help but have distinctive identities. Some denominations, like the Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers, believe in pacifism and non-violence, and Christians who believe that these are the proper conclusions to draw from Jesus' teachings may well have good reason to make one of these denominations their religious home. It is perfectly natural that someone of Greek heritage may feel most at home in a Greek Orthodox church, and an African-American in one of the African-American churches. I shall return to the question of the diversity of Christian congregations and denominations in the next chapter.

Many Christians come to consider their church communities to be something like their extended family, or “family of choice”. For some, the couple of hours they spend at church or in activities with their Christian friends may be the only time in the week when they feel like they truly *belong*. And indeed, we see in the Bible that from early on, Christians thought of one another as sisters and brothers in the Lord. This, of course, makes *theological* sense in light of the idea that those who have accepted Jesus are adopted as God’s children. If you and I are adopted into the same family, we now live as siblings, however different our backgrounds might be. Like any sibling relationships, these differences can present challenges. But many Christians find it a source of great strength and encouragement that the Christian life is something that they share with others – that they are in it *together*. And in this, there can also be much inspiration. We meet people whose examples we admire and emulate, and this is among the things that can “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” We come to love other Christians we meet, but from some of them we also *learn how to love* in ways we did not know before, both by seeing their example and by sharing in their joys and sorrows. *Living out* our faith is something we have to learn how to do, and often we learn from the experience of others. And in loving them, we come to care about their needs and are inspired to minister to those needs, much as we might hope that others would do the same for us. And the many different things particular members of a church have endured may inspire initiatives in common ministry. If one family in a church has experienced homelessness, the rest of the congregation might not just assist them, but in the process grow in their compassion for others outside the church in similar situations,

and become active in serving the homeless or building homes through Habitat for Humanity.

We have moved here from a discussion of Christian worship to one of Christian *community*. But they are not utterly separate matters. Christians become a community initially through being people who worship the same God and follow the same Lord. The people that Jesus called to be his disciples had little in common with one another – several were fishermen, one a tax collector, another had been a Zealot (a political revolutionary). It is unlikely that some of them would have had anything to do with the others save for the fact of their common relationship to Jesus. It is the same for Christians in every age: we feel called to become community because of our shared relationship with Jesus and our worship of him. There is something profoundly powerful about being surrounded in worship by people with whom I share little else in common, many of whom I may disagree with about every other topic, and yet there we are together, praising God and seeking his will in our lives. It is a living symbol of the ways Christians believe God is calling human beings beyond themselves and their worldly identities and attachments, and is in the process of creating a new humanity united to himself. It is sometimes only in common worship that Christians have a rich and concrete sense of how God is making them into “one body” and a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.



## The Sacraments

There are two practices that are particularly distinctive to Christianity and important for Christians which generally occur within the context of collective Christian worship: baptism and holy communion.

### **Baptism**

Baptism is the ritual that Christians use in becoming Christians. In it, the new Christian is either immersed in water or has water poured over her head, invoking the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is as old as the Church itself. Jesus' ministry began with his own baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. He in turn baptized others and instructed his disciples to do the same in the Great Commission, and Christians have always viewed baptism as the point of entry into the Church.

The Bible tells us that John the Baptist offered baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The symbolism of water is clear here – one's sins are, as it were, washed away. But Christians also see baptism as connected to the conferral of the Holy Spirit. It was when Jesus was baptized that the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and in the Book of Acts it is clear that early Christians expected this when a new Christian was baptized as well, and viewed this as going beyond the kind of baptism that John performed. (Luke 3:16, Acts 1:5, Acts 19) Christians view baptism neither as magic nor as purely symbolic. Water does not in general take away sin. A daily shower

may be good physical hygiene, but it does nothing to change our inner spiritual condition or bring about God's forgiveness. Nor does adding a particular set of words as a formulaic incantation bring about a spiritual transformation. That takes place because God has in fact offered forgiveness and new life in Christ, and a particular individual has accepted it. Baptism is an act in which the acceptance of forgiveness and new life is acted out in the presence of others.

The ceremony of baptism is thus in a sense "symbolic" – the bodily cleansing with water (which may not actually even take off much dirt, much less sin) is an outward sign of a deeper spiritual event. Yet it is not *merely* symbolic. In the ceremony of baptism, a person formally renounces the world, the flesh, and the devil, repents of sin, and accepts Christ; and Christians believe that when she does so, God takes away her sins and grants her new life in Christ. Christians use the word 'sacrament' for this special type of act in which something is done as an outward and visible sign (in this case, what is done with water and the words that are said in the ceremony) of an inward and invisible spiritual reality (in this case, forgiveness of sin, incorporation into the Body of Christ, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit).

There are, of course, some obvious questions here. If a person is saved in accepting Jesus as savior and Lord, why does she need to be baptized? If, say, a person accepts Jesus on her deathbed and no one is there to baptize her, is she still saved? If someone goes through the ritual of baptism but does not accept Christ in the process, what happens then? There are in fact stories in Acts where people accepted Christ and even showed manifestations of the Holy Spirit before being baptized. (Acts 10:44-46) They were then baptized anyway, because this is what

Jesus commanded his disciples to do. And in fact, if a person feels moved to accept Christ, it is both unlikely and unwise for him to wait for the next opportunity to be baptized before accepting Christ into his heart. But that does not mean he should not be baptized as well. In being baptized at a later date, he solemnizes his acceptance of Christ and makes public profession of his faith. There is no reason for him not to do so, and every reason to do it.

On the other hand, a person may have been baptized as an infant, or have gone through the ceremony as an adolescent or an adult, without actually accepting salvation – perhaps because other people wished or expected it of him. The first people to be baptized were all adults who undertook it willingly and out of a desire to be saved. But already in Acts we find people who accept Jesus being baptized *along with their entire families*. (Acts 16:33) That presumably included children too young to have any understanding of what they were doing, and for all we know it might have included family members who either did not understand what they were doing or else went along with it only because the rest of the family was doing it. And as Christians understood baptism to be an important part of becoming a Christian, it became a common practice to baptize new babies as soon as possible, both out of a fear that babies who were not baptized might die unsaved and out of a hope that they might receive, as soon as possible, whatever grace is imparted at baptism. In the Reformation, some Protestant denominations rejected this practice. The tradition known as “Baptists”, for example, are so-called because they believe that a person should, like the very first Christians, be baptized only when they have actually accepted Jesus as their savior – something it is not really possible to do with

full understanding before adolescence or at least late childhood. Baptists thus defer baptism until a child or adolescent is old enough to make a commitment to Christ for herself.

Christians who do baptize infants also understand the need for personal acceptance of Christ as savior, and many have developed rituals for a public profession of their faith once they have reached the age where they are able to make such a commitment for themselves. In the rite of confirmation practiced in many churches, an adult or adolescent is asked the same questions and makes the same vows that are made at baptism, but is not baptized again. Likewise, if a person has left the faith and come back, or has fallen into a period of sin that has separated him from God and the Church, he can be brought back without needing to be rebaptized. The Church regards baptism as a one-time thing, as God's work of salvation and reconciliation through Christ needed to be done only once, and the restoration of relationship with God it imparts is ongoing. If there is a need for forgiveness of sins afterwards, or for a person who has lost his faith to return, God is always willing. Some churches have developed additional ceremonies for these things – rites of confession and absolution, and opportunities to reavow one's faith before God and the Church. Some churches view these as additional sacraments, while others reserve the word 'sacrament' for the particular things found in the Bible and commanded by Jesus.

## **Holy Communion**

The second of these “Biblical sacraments” is what is variously called holy communion, the eucharist, the Lord’s supper, or the mass. In it, Christians consecrate bread and wine and consume it together. It is clear from the Book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament that the early Christians did this regularly when they met on the Lord’s day, and for many Christians this is a central part of their Sunday worship. (It can be done on other days as well, and indeed some take communion daily when it is possible for them to do so.)

Why do Christians do this? The origins are found in the things Jesus said and did on the night before his death, at his final meal with his disciples before his crucifixion, commonly called the Last Supper. Here is how it is reported in Luke’s Gospel:

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Luke 26:14-20)

The celebration of communion is done in response to Jesus’ command, “Do this in remembrance of me.” It is, of course, not easy to make sense of what Jesus might have meant in saying that the bread he was breaking was his body and the wine he was pouring his blood. As you might expect, this is the sort of thing that has given rise to a great deal of theological and philosophical speculation. (If you were to look

up words such as ‘transubstantiation’ and ‘consubstantiation’, you would find discussions of some very sophisticated theories on the topic of the relationship between Jesus’ body and blood and the bread and wine used in communion.) At very least, Christians view communion as an act in which they remember and celebrate Jesus’ saving death and life-giving resurrection. Some view it as purely symbolic: there is nothing but ordinary bread and wine involved, but they use that to remember what Jesus did and in obedience to his command at the last supper. Others believe that the bread and wine are in some fashion transformed into Jesus’ body and blood. But if we ask, “in *what* fashion?”, we enter very difficult territory. If we took the consecrated bread and wine to a laboratory for testing, the lab technicians would surely find only bread and wine, not human flesh and blood. And this would come as no surprise even to those Christian traditions that believe that some fundamental change has occurred in them. They believe that they remain like ordinary bread and wine in their outward appearance – in all the ways that can be perceived by the senses or tested in a laboratory – but that there is an invisible change in their spiritual essence. It takes a good deal of sophisticated philosophical and theological terminology to even articulate a *theory* of this, but it seems to me that the ordinary Christian does not need to understand such theories. What many Christians find so deeply moving about communion is that they understand that, *in some sense*, in eating the bread and drinking the wine, they are actually taking something of Christ into themselves. In the words used in my denomination, they “*become for us* the body and blood” of Christ. Many Christians may at some point in their lives also be curious about *how it works*, but you don’t have to know how it

works to believe that *it is so*. Indeed, it is precisely the *mystery* of it – not in the sense of a puzzle to be solved, but of something that goes beyond human understanding – that makes it a moving and transformative experience.

## **Marriage**

Some Christian churches also regard Christian marriage as a sacrament. Of course, people were married long before Christianity came along, and non-Christians are married today. Unlike baptism and communion, marriage is not an exclusively Christian institution. But the Bible uses the metaphor of marriage in the Old Testament for God's relationship with Israel, and in the New Testament for Christ's relationship with the Church, which is sometimes referred to as the "bride of Christ". This is in part a way of expressing something about God's relationship with us in terms that are more familiar. But Christians have also seen it as having implications for human marriage, or at least for Christian marriage. Husbands should love their wives in the same kind of way that Christ loves the Church. (Ephesians 5:25) And many Christians feel that the very practice of marriage, in which two people's lives are so joined that they become "one flesh" (1 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 5:32), was itself a part of God's way of revealing something about himself to human beings: that it is not so much that marriage provides a metaphor through which we can understand something about God, as that human marriage, at least in a proper and sanctified form, really is a sign of divine love, and a lesser copy of that love.

## Reading the Bible

Christians believe that the books that make up the Bible are inspired by God. Indeed, they often refer to the Bible as “the word of God”, or even simply “the word”. There have certainly been a variety of views Christians have taken about just *how* the Bible was inspired – say, whether the human authors received it verbatim as a kind of divine dictation or whether God shaped their minds through experience and the hidden actions of the Holy Spirit so that they composed the texts as we have them. I shall not pretend that how we think about the inspiration of the Bible doesn’t matter, but I shall not discuss theories of inspiration here. Whatever their views on this – and indeed the vast majority of Christians may never have given any thought to the question at all – Christians have generally shared something like the view expressed in Paul’s second letter to Timothy:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Here Paul indeed says that Scripture is inspired by God, but says nothing further about what that means or how it came about. His emphasis, rather, is on the role Scripture should play in the lives of Christians: that it is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, and preparation for doing good works. Of course, when Paul wrote this letter, much of the New Testament was not even written yet, and Christians did not yet consider Paul’s letters or the other books that would come to make up the New Testament “Scripture”. When Paul spoke of



“Scripture”, he probably had what Christians call the Old Testament in mind. It was only later that Christians came to view the Gospels and the other books in the New Testament as having a similar status as holy books.

Of course, what is in the Bible becomes useful *to me* only to the extent that I am acquainted with it, and I become acquainted with it only by reading it or hearing it. In many parts of the world today, it is easy to acquire a copy of the Bible or to read its contents online. Before the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century, however, most people did not know how to read, and books themselves were rare and expensive because they had to be carefully copied by hand. Historically, most Christians’ exposure to Scripture came primarily by way of what was read aloud in church services. In addition, one of the functions of church paintings, statuary, and stained glass windows was to present important Biblical stories in a visual form that ordinary people who did not know how to read and had no access to a copy of the Bible could understand. People living in an oral culture were probably much better than most of us today at remembering verbatim the things that they had heard, but the mass production of printed Bibles and the spread of literacy that accompanied it brought about a dramatic and even revolutionary change in the ordinary person’s ability to have access to the Bible, and the Protestant denominations in particular made personal Bible reading a central emphasis. (And indeed the spread of literacy in Europe was initially motivated specifically by people’s desire to read *the Bible*.)

The Christian Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments, and among the books of the New Testament, Christians accord a special status to the Gospels, which

present the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Most of the other books of the New Testament are letters that contain what Christians regard as inspired teaching and exhortation. This division is also reflected in the readings that are given aloud in the worship services of many Christian denominations, which traditionally include a reading from the Old Testament, one from the letters of the New Testament, and one from one of the Gospels, as well as one or more of the psalms found in the Old Testament. This provides a useful outline for discussing the reading and study of the Bible, and the more so because, historically, many Christians were exposed to the Bible primarily through public readings at worship services. (And indeed, this is true for those contemporary Christians who attend church but do not read the Bible on their own as well.)

Christians find it important to read the Gospels because it is there that they find the life and words of Jesus. Of course, it only stands to reason that, if you think this particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, was God incarnate, you're going to take a keen interest in learning what he had to say and how he lived. It was in part Jesus' teachings and how he talked to others that drew people to him two thousand years ago and helped convince some of them to call him Lord. Christians of subsequent generations are in the opposite position: they call Jesus "Lord" but have not met him in the flesh, and can find out what he said and taught only by reading or hearing it. If they wish to try to emulate him – to be what Paul described as "imitators of Christ" – they must discover how he lived and behaved, and the only way to do this is to become familiar with the Gospels.

Christians also focus on particular parts of Jesus' life in particular seasons of the year. While Christians remember Jesus' death and resurrection every Sunday, the Church has long observed a special day remembering Jesus' resurrection in the spring, around the time of the Jewish feast of Passover. English-speaking readers will know this holiday by the name "Easter", though in some other languages it is still called by a name derived from the word "Passover". (In French, for example, it is called *Pasque*.) And from early times, Christians set aside the forty days preceding Easter, called Lent, as a time in which those wishing to be baptized and become Christians would prepare and other Christians would fast, repent their sins, and reflect upon Jesus' suffering and death. Similarly, for the fifty days after Easter, they read and reflect upon Jesus' resurrection and his post-resurrection interactions with his disciples, leading up to the day on which the coming of the Holy Spirit is observed, the feast of Pentecost. (The texts for which are found in the Acts of the Apostles.) Christians also specially recall Jesus' birth and incarnation on the day that is commonly called Christmas in English, though it is also referred to as the Nativity (from the Latin word for birth), and readings about the events leading up to Jesus' miraculous birth are the focus of Gospel readings for the four weeks preceding that day. During the remainder of the Church year, the Sunday readings are taken from Jesus' teachings and the stories of his works.

The weekly readings for Sunday worship also include a passage from the Old Testament. In these, Christians find the holy history of God's creation of the world and his interactions with men and women, particularly with the Jewish people and their ancestor Abraham. This includes the Law that God gave the Jews through

Moses; and while Christians believe that certain portions of that Law (such as the dietary laws and dress code and the laws concerning sacrifice) were meant only for the Jews and do not apply to Christians, they regard the moral laws (such as the Ten Commandments) as binding upon them as well. Like Jews, Christians believe that reading these laws can help them understand how God wishes them to live, and what sorts of actions are prohibited.

But the Law is only a portion of the Old Testament. In it we also find many other stories about God's words and actions. The words God spoke through the prophets include important teachings about how God calls people to live, and also reveal God's judgment of individuals and societies who live wrongly. For example, the story of the destruction of Sodom is found in the nineteenth chapter of Genesis, but the *reason* God destroyed it is revealed only in the words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel:

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. (Ezekiel 16: 49-50)

The things that the prophets warn against – falling out of relationship with God, worship of other gods, impurity, sins such as greed, pride, and gluttony, and social and economic injustices such as not aiding the poor and needy – are temptations that Christians still face today and often find in their own societies, and the prophets provide vivid reminders that God cares about such things.

One book of the Old Testament has taken on a surprisingly large role in Christian worship: the Book of Psalms. The psalms are a curious blend of prayer

and poetry. Some of them are marked as having been composed by King David, but with others the authorship is unknown. In them we find the writers speaking to and about God in the midst of all the circumstances of their lives: expressing their pain, sorrow, and fear, and calling out to God for deliverance, rejoicing in their blessings and giving God thanks, contemplating God's majesty and mighty works in praise and adoration. Church services generally include at least one psalm, and the several daily prayer services that monks undertake are made up predominantly of singing psalms or reading them aloud together. The reason for this is that generations of Christians have found in the psalms models for how to pray more deeply. Apart from the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms are the part of the Bible that provides the richest instruction in prayer – not by supplying instructions *about how* to pray, but through the examples given by people who knew how to pray and set down their prayers in verse. Many Christians have found that, in reading and reciting the psalms, those prayers become their own, and they learn to pray in ways that would never have occurred to them without such inspired examples.

The final component of the readings in Sunday worship is made up of passages drawn from the letters of the New Testament (sometimes called by the Greek word for letter, *epistle*). The letters were, of course, written *to* Christians, and contemporary Christians find that much of what is contained within those letters written two thousand years ago is still relevant to them as well. On the one hand, they contain explanations of various things that are important in the Christian life: Christ's work of salvation, the relationship of Christ to the Law, the process of sanctification, the spiritual gifts, and indeed the fact that there are some things

about God's plan that were still mysterious even to those who knew Jesus in the flesh or to whom he appeared in a vision. Much of how Christians understand their faith is based upon explanations provided in the letters.

The letters also provide *exhortations* about how to live: encouragement in faith, virtue, and good works; warnings against sin and error; admonitions to stand firm in faith in the face of rejection and persecution. Christians often find that these speak to their own situations as well. Like the original audiences, contemporary Christians also find themselves sliding back into sin, facing divisions in their churches, and torn between the demands of Christ and the world. In some parts of the world, Christians today, like those in the early Church, live in fear of persecution and even being killed for their faith. In reading the words of the leaders of the early Church, Christians today can take heart that whatever they are facing was also the lot of saints who have gone before, be instructed by their words, and be inspired and encouraged by their example.

Of course, outside of the readings for Sunday worship, individual Christians and groups who are studying Scripture together may approach the texts in any number of ways. They might, for example, work through one of the Gospels or letters or one of the books of the Old Testament from start to finish over several meetings. Or they might look at passages that share a theme – say, the parables of Jesus, or the various passages in the Bible concerning love. Or a person might feel drawn to spend a great deal of time reading a particular passage over and over, internalizing it and trying to reach a deeper understanding of it. In a group, each

member might share his or her reactions to a passage, their questions about it, and the insights each might have. If there is someone present who is more knowledgeable about the Bible, that person might provide instruction, or the group might read a part of the Bible in conjunction with one or more of the many printed commentaries on it that are readily available today in many parts of the world. Many Christians make daily personal Bible readings, and weekly meetings to read and discuss a portion of the Bible with a group of fellow believers, a central part of their lives.

### **Fasting and Ascetic Practice**

Christians also have practices in which they abstain, either temporarily or permanently, from things that they do not consider to be prohibited. The most basic and familiar of these is fasting. Fasting is not an exclusively Christian practice – it has been practiced around the world for thousands of years – but it is one referred to frequently in the Bible and practiced by many Christians. Perhaps when you hear the word ‘fasting’ you think of not eating any solid food, but it can apply to voluntarily giving up anything for a specified period of time. Someone who is fasting from food might also give up liquids other than water, or a person might give up only particular foods – meat, sweets, alcoholic beverages. You may know, for example, that Roman Catholics have traditionally fasted from meat on Fridays,

especially during the season of Lent, which is a penitential season in which many individual Christians and Christian denominations fast from one thing or another.

Why do people fast? Some, of course, do it because they are members of churches in which it is expected, but that only pushes back to the question to why their church recommends it. Practiced in moderation, the right kinds of fasting can also be healthy; but if you are abstaining from something *solely* for your health, it is not really fasting in the spiritual sense. Fasting has long been practiced during periods of intense prayer, self-examination, and discernment (trying to determine what God wants you to do). It might seem counterintuitive that fasting can help clear and concentrate the mind, because at first fasting can be quite distracting. If you are used to eating at regular times, your body tends to let you know very quickly if a mealtime has gone by without the usual food and drink. Two hours past a missed meal, you might find yourself having a hard time thinking about anything except the rumbling in your stomach and the food that could assuage it. But those who have practiced fasting over the centuries find that, if you stick with it, it can clarify the mind and assist in hearing the leadings of the Holy Spirit within us. They often feel that it helps to purify both body and soul, making us more keenly aware of ourselves, of God, and of the world around us.

But the very ways in which fasting is uncomfortable can also be beneficial. We become more aware of the ways our bodies and minds are accustomed to specific things which they do not really need. We need to eat, of course, and some people (for example, diabetics) need to eat at regular intervals and in very particular ways. But most of us do not need to eat the *particular* things we eat, nor do most



Westerners need to eat as much or as often as they do. If you try to abstain from alcohol, or candy, or steak and it seems to drive you crazy, the problem is not that you are not getting enough nutrition, the problem is that you have a physical or psychological dependency. And while people with certain health problems or are engaged in strenuous physical activity should definitely consult with their doctors before undertaking a fast, many healthy people can go for days or weeks without any food at all without it causing physical harm. Indeed, while I have never fasted from all food for more than two days myself, I have read that around the third day it tends to cease to be painful and begins to be enjoyable. (By contrast, we can only go for a very short time without water, and dehydration quickly becomes a dangerous condition, so people who fast generally drink plenty of water. The recommended outer limit for fasting from food is thirty or forty days, after which the body begins to consume itself, and any particular person's limits may be shorter, so people who wish to try fasting are encouraged to begin with short fasts and seek guidance from someone who is acquainted with their health and understands fasting.)

Giving something up *forever* is not quite the same thing as fasting, though in the course of fasting from something a person might decide they are better off without it and never take it up again. Fasting might reveal to me that sugar or alcohol or even just eating *as much* as I do leaves me sluggish or irritable, and I might conclude that I would be happier if I were to stay away from them entirely. Or I might discover just how attached I had become to fine and expensive food and drink and realize that I have been a kind of slave to these attachments. In this respect, both fasting and more permanent self-denial can be a part of the process of

ongoing renunciation of the aspects of “the flesh” that keep us from being the people God wants us to be. I happen to be the kind of person who is capable of developing tastes for fine food and drink. In fact, I have consciously avoided ever buying really fine wines because I knew that I might end up dissatisfied with the kinds of wines I could really afford – and with wine, there is essentially no upper limit to the price. Similarly, there have been times that, in visiting a city with a famously good gourmet restaurant, I have been willing to pay the high price to eat something extraordinary. Perhaps the reader shares such tastes, or perhaps she is like many of my friends who find this urge ridiculous and incomprehensible. If you fall into the latter category, I in fact envy you: given a choice, I would prefer not to be the sort of person who is tempted when presented with an opportunity to have truffles or caviar. For that matter, I would prefer to lose my taste for deep-fried foods and potato chips, even though they are a good deal cheaper. And, much as I love bacon – really it seems as though there must be special taste buds and receptors in the brain for bacon – I am also troubled at the thought that pigs are actually intelligent and social animals on a par with dogs. (It is interesting that the kosher laws end up excluding all of the most intelligent species.)

So fasting and self-denial can also put us in touch with issues that we might take for granted if we do not learn to question our appetites. Some foods are not really healthy as a regular part of our diets. The production of meats sometimes involves cruelty to animals, which raises moral issues about our entanglement with our fallen world. But perhaps most fundamentally, I do not wish to be the sort of person who is a slave to his appetites, and I really only come to know the grip they

have on me when I say no to them. And of course this goes for things other than food and drink as well: there have been periods of my life in which I was addicted to television, and even today I check my email and social media far more often than I should, and certainly more than I need to. When I find that such habits waste away my time, control my life, and make me less than I could be, I can only conclude that God would wish me to make a change. Likewise, there are good things that I realize that I should be doing but am not. Some of these – like practices or prayer or the good works discussed in [the next section] – are clearly connected to my spiritual life. But there are also things like getting regular exercise, which is not only important to bodily health but also enables me to live a longer and more active life in which I am better able to love and serve God and my neighbor.

Practices in which we give up something that we like or undertake something that (at least at first) we do not are also known as *ascetic* practices. Asceticism is badly misunderstood. When we hear the word ‘asceticism’ we might think of people living an extremely sparse and dreary life – wearing sackcloth, sleeping on the ground, eating nothing but bread and water, perhaps even wearing hair shirts or beating themselves with scourges. There are, of course, ascetics who have done such things. But the word ‘asceticism’ actually comes from a Greek word (*askesis*) for physical training – that is, it is the kind of regimen an athlete in training for a sporting event undertakes in preparation. If you have ever been involved in athletics, you will be familiar with how much time is spent, not only in actually playing and practicing the sport, but also in things like lifting weights to build muscle, doing sprints to build speed and endurance, and doing drills to practice

particular skills. These activities are generally not entirely pleasant in their own right – you have to press yourself hard if you are going to make progress, and may end up exhausted on the day of practice and sore the next. But without them, you would be unable to effectively compete.

Early Christians saw a kind of analogy between athletics and the Christian spiritual life. (In fact, the Greek philosophical schools had seen the analogy between physical exercise and “spiritual exercise” before them, and it was they who first applied the term *askesis* to spiritual training.) There is nothing *easy* about eliminating bad habits, and eradicating bad inclinations is even harder. It is often every bit as difficult to practice virtues such as patience or kindness, because our fallen natures have not yet been entirely raised up, and we find ourselves in circumstances that provoke irritability and malice. The goal of ascetic practices is to identify and root out such weeds in our souls, and to do so intentionally and systematically through deliberately abstaining from the bad things and practicing the good. Asceticism is thus seen by Christians as a means to an end – the sanctification of the soul – rather than as an end in itself. And, like any serious athletic training, it is best undertaken with the guidance of an experienced coach. Just as you can injure yourself by trying to lift too much weight or not doing it in the proper way, you can injure yourself, both physically and spiritually, through fasting and other ascetic practices that are undertaken unwisely. Likewise, just as some people get addicted to bodybuilding and end up developing their bodies in ways that are ultimately unhealthy, there are people who have made a rigid and austere lifestyle the center of their lives – the end rather than the means. From a Christian

perspective, something has gone wrong here. Such people have put something other than God at the center of their lives, and often fall into a spiritual pride in which they think themselves holier or better than others and forget the essential role that God's grace plays in any real progress. And for Christians, it is pride – not lust, anger, or gluttony – that is the deepest and most serious of sins.

## Good Works and Virtues

I shall conclude the chapter with a discussion of a variety of kinds of practices that might collectively be called “good works” and the cultivation of the virtues that go hand in hand with them. I suggested earlier that there is a close and mutual relationship between outward behavior and inward character. On the one hand, our actions are often manifestations of settled character traits. A person is given to violent outbursts because he is an angry or bitter person or takes the time to do something right because he is patient. On the other hand, such character traits are often gained through practice in doing the actions associated with them until they become second nature. One gains patience through putting the clutch in on one's irritation when facing difficult or tiresome situations. Good character traits are traditionally referred to as *virtues* and bad ones as *vices*.

Our language does not always draw clear boundaries between actions and character. For example, the word ‘generous’ can describe an *action* of abundant giving, and can also describe the *character* of someone who is inclined towards

giving abundantly. These two meanings can in fact come apart. A person who is in reality quite stingy might make nonetheless a sizeable donation in order to secure a good reputation or because someone blackmailed him into doing so. We might say that it was a generous donation or a generous sum of money simply on the basis of *how much* he gave. But that does not mean that he made the donation *out of generosity*.

### **Charity, Giving, and Money**

There is a similar story to be told about the word ‘charity’. ‘Charity’ is the English version of the Latin word *caritas*, which is in turn the translation of one of the Greek words for love, *agape*. (Pronounced *ah-GAH-pay*.) Greek in fact has several distinct words for different types of love, including *eros* (which is the root of our word ‘erotic’, and is concerned with sexual and romantic love) and *philia* (meaning “friendship”). We have already mentioned that the Christian Bible treats love as the greatest virtue, even as one that encompasses all of the others. In the texts in which this occurs, the word used is *agape*, not *eros* or *philia*.

While the word *agape* did not originate in the New Testament, it was not a frequently-used word in ancient Greek, and seems to have been taken up principally by Christians to express the special type of love shown by God and extolled as a virtue that Christians should seek. It seems to be distinguished as a love that is not tinged by self-centered motives. Erotic love is inseparable from a kind of desire for the other person, and even friendship is founded on shared interests, mutual esteem, and the enjoyment of one another’s company. *Agape*, by contrast, recognizes the

intrinsic worth and dignity of others, and desires *their* good, even if it does nothing for oneself. For Christians, of course, the paradigmatic example of such love is Jesus' willingness to give his own life that others might be saved. To avoid confusing this kind of love with other ways the word 'love' is used in English, Christian writers sometimes prefer to use the original Greek word *agape*, its Latin translation *caritas*, or the Anglicized version of the latter, 'charity'. If you read, say, a serious Roman Catholic spiritual manual and see the word 'charity', it usually means *agape* love.

This, however, can be confusing, because in ordinary English, 'charity' tends to mean the donation of money or goods to those in financial or material need. Indeed, we refer to organizations whose purpose is to help those in need as "charities". The connection is clear enough: a person who loves others and sees them in need will be disposed to do what she can to assist them, and giving from her own wealth or possessions is one way to do this. It is not the *only* way – sometimes what a person needs is a sympathetic ear or a ride to work or simply to be treated with respect. These can equally be provided out of love, and they too require one to give something of herself – her time, her attention, her service.

The Bible makes it very clear that Christians are expected to try to assist those in need in such ways as they can. John's first letter says "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:17) And, as so is often the case, it is Jesus himself who puts it in the most challenging way. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, he depicts those who do such things as feeding the hungry as sitting at his right hand but those who do not excluded from his kingdom.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Christians have regarded this passage as providing at least a partial list of things (sometimes called "acts of corporeal mercy") that Christians are expected to do: providing food, drink, clothing, and shelter to those without it, visiting the sick and those in prison.

Likewise, in the passage where he proclaims the "golden rule" of doing to others as we would have them to us, Jesus says to give to everyone who begs:

Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:30-31)

Such a commandment may well sound like a recipe for trouble, and indeed it is clear that in the early Church there were people who tried to take advantage of the generosity that Christians expected of themselves. Paul addresses such a situation in his letter to the Christians at Thessaloniki in equally stark terms: "Anyone



unwilling to work should not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10) Clearly the generosity involved in the Christian conception of love also requires prudence: a Christian is expected to try to assist those truly in need, but one is not doing someone a real favor by encouraging him to live idly as a parasite upon others. And of course in practice it is not always easy to determine which is which.

It is clear from the Book of Acts, however, that the early Christians were generous with their wealth and possessions to an extent that even most contemporary Christians would find quite daunting.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

There have been Christian groups that have attempted to emulate the model described here, and it is indeed practiced within the Church’s monastic orders, where monks and nuns take vows of poverty and own nothing of their own. But most Christians have taken the view that there is nothing wrong with owning private property, or even being wealthy, but that they are expected to be generous with their wealth in assisting others who are in need.

The early Church’s model, however, may have played a role in transforming the way in which charitable actions were carried out. Jesus’ sayings seem to be addressed to his audience as individuals, but the passage from Acts suggests that the

Church quickly adopted a more centralized model of collection and distribution, and we read two chapters later that this had grown into a sufficiently large operation that they appointed a new order of people, called *deacons*, to distribute things to those in need. Church-related charitable organizations that house, clothe, and feed the poor and Christian hospitals and medical missions may be so familiar today that it is difficult to imagine a world without them, and today there are secular organizations that do the same things. But no such institutions existed in the Roman world, and we may regard them as largely Christian innovations. Basil of Caesarea, for example, is credited with founding the first hospital in the Western world in 369, and for many centuries the Christian monastic orders were the primary place to go for treatment of illness. Indeed, for many centuries, most of the things an American of my generation expects to be done by governmental social service agencies were in fact done by the Church.

This again brings us back to the relationship between Christians and their money. The Bible is clear enough that Christians should not be lovers of wealth. Indeed, Paul writes that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” (1 Timothy 6:10) And it is clear enough that Christians are expected to be generous in assisting those in need, and to do so with a cheerful and generous spirit. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7) But there is a further question of how much of this is to be done directly by individuals, and how much through the Church. And of course the Church also requires money for other things as well, such as the financial support of those who have devoted their lives to full-time Christian ministry. Even in the age of the apostles, it seems that some of them devoted themselves full-time to preaching

and teaching and were supported by other Christians, while Paul supported himself through his trade as a tent-maker. The early Christians did not build church buildings, meeting instead in private homes; but over the years Christian churches have acquired a great deal of real estate, often very large buildings requiring substantial upkeep.

Many churches expect or encourage their members to contribute a proportion of their income – called a *tithe* – to the work of the church. This is based on a model found under the Law in the Old Testament. When the Israelites took possession of the promised land, the territory was divided among its tribes. But one tribe, the Levites, was not assigned any land, but instead took on the duties of making sacrifices in the Temple on behalf of the entire nation. (Numbers 18) Because the Levites had no property of their own, members of the other tribes were expected to support them by giving a tithe (one tenth) of their crops and flocks. Tithing is mentioned several times in the New Testament in reference to Jewish practices, but is never explicitly recommended as a model for the Church. By the sixth century, however, the Church – which had by that time become much larger as the official religion of the Roman Empire – began to expect individual Christians to tithe, which is to say to give ten percent of their income to the Church. Today, some churches set the tithe as an official standard for Christian giving and others do not. A few actually require members to produce documentation of their income and to contribute at least a tenth of that as a condition for membership, but most treat it as a voluntary matter. Indeed, in most churches I am familiar with, only a small portion of their members actually give ten percent of their income to the church,

though a larger number may give a tenth of their income once we count other charitable giving.

While there is a great deal of disagreement among Christians over how to think about financial giving, there are several more general principles that are more generally acknowledged. One of these is largely practical: if you are going to have a place to meet for worship and trained people to minister to the church community, this costs money and it is the responsibility of the members of the church to support its work. This was easy enough in an age when nearly everyone belonged to one church or another and wealthy individuals were eager to bestow large donations, but many churches are finding it much more difficult today. Contrary to the impression you might get from seeing television preachers who preach in large, packed buildings and have become quite wealthy, most Christian ministers live on quite modest salaries – some in outright poverty – and many Christians worship in aging buildings they cannot afford to repair. Indeed, as the size of congregations in my country declines, there are an increasing number that have neither a building of their own nor paid professional ministers.

The second principle is more spiritual: Christians are clearly expected to be generous with what they have received and ready to share with those in need. This, however, can take many forms: through direct face-to-face giving, through the church or church organizations, through other private charities. In an age in which a large institutional church supplied most of what we would today call “social services”, it might make sense to contribute towards the needs of others primarily through donations to the church. But with many of those same functions supported

by tax dollars, and a greater selection of charitable organizations, many Christians think of charitable giving as something distinct from their contributions to support the work of the church.

The third principle is also spiritual, and like the tithe is rooted in an idea that begins in the Old Testament. This is the idea that, whatever its practical value, giving is also a spiritual act expressing gratitude for what we have received from God. In fact, as Christians believe that ultimately we receive everything from God, such giving is in fact *giving back*. In the Old Testament, we find that the Israelites were expected to give the “first fruits” of their flocks and fields – the first and best of what they produced, not what was left over – to the service of God. In the Old Testament context of supporting one of the twelve tribes that had no land of their own, the tithe might be a reasonable proportion to give. But even Christians who do not recognize a ten percent giving standard often find it an important part of their spiritual lives to recognize, by giving away the first portion of whatever they earn, that what they have received, they have received by God’s grace, and to express their gratitude by giving back to support God’s work through the Church or passing it on more directly to those who need it more.

### **Deeds, Practices, and Virtues**

There are, in fact, quite a number of passages in the New Testament that present lists of things for Christians to practice or avoid. Some of these are repetitions of things already found in the Law: Christians should not, of course, murder, steal, commit adultery, have sex outside of marriage, lie, disrespect their

parents, worship idols, or practice sorcery. There was some early discussion in the Church about whether Christians needed to follow the Jewish dietary laws, but the opinion that prevailed was that they did not, though Christians were expected not to consume blood or food that had been offered to idols. On the other hand, drunkenness, which is not addressed in the Law, repeatedly receives sweeping condemnation in the New Testament. Jesus is critical of the allowances for divorce under the Law (Matthew 19), and early Christians believed that a life of singleness and celibacy was the better state for many – not because there was anything wrong with marriage, but because individuals who remained single could devote themselves fully to God’s work. (It was only a thousand years later that the Western church began to *require* celibacy of those who took religious vows. This was rejected by Protestants and was never the practice in the Eastern churches.) In the New Testament we also find an expanded emphasis on the importance of speech. The Old Testament indeed prohibits lying, false witness, and taking the Lord’s name in vain, but the New Testament adds obscenity, crude joking, wrangling, unnecessary controversies, and gossip to the list of things Christians are to avoid, and the Letter of James speaks in eloquent terms of the importance of “taming the tongue”. (James 3)

But in Jesus’ teachings we also find a more inward turn, drawing attention to the inner causes of sin. In the passage in which he declared all foods clean, his point is that defilement does not come from what we eat, but from sources within us:

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:14-23)

This emphasis upon inner spiritual virtues and vices as the roots of good and bad deeds is taken up in the letters of the New Testament. Peter, for example, exhorts his readers to abandon “all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.” (1 Peter 2:1) And James writes:

Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for[ those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul contrasts the *works* of the flesh with the *fruit* of the Spirit.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:19-23)

It is interesting that in this passage the “works of the flesh” include both actions (fornication, quarrels, etc.) and the inner states that cause them (enmity, jealousy), while the “fruit of the spirit” are all dispositions of character and other

inner states, such as love, joy, and patience. This strikes me as deeply significant. It is easy enough to list many of the bad things we should avoid doing, and there is indeed a risk that we will make the mistake of understanding morality exclusively in terms of a list of things to avoid, and fail to notice their deeper roots. But it is far more difficult to give a similar list of actions that might add up to any kind of *recipe* for moral goodness. Goodness consists in things like being loving, patient, kind, and gentle. You cannot capture the nature of love by giving a list of actions a loving person does, because love is deeply responsive to the person and situation at hand. Self-control is not an outward behavior, but a process through which we evaluate and control what we shall do.

Paul's description of these virtuous states as *fruits of the Spirit* invokes the kind of botanical metaphor we saw in Jesus' parable of the vine, and emphasizes that the growth of such virtues is not something that the Christian understands as *merely* a psychological process taking place within an individual, but also involves God's grace in sanctifying and transforming human nature. In this respect, the Christian understanding of the fruit of the Spirit is markedly different from the kinds of discussion of virtue found in Greek philosophers like Aristotle. But this does not mean that the classical philosophers were entirely mistaken. Christians agree with Aristotle that virtues like love, patience, and kindness are not acquired all at once, but gradually and through practice. We need to *grow* in the virtues. And human growth requires both nutrition and exercise. The spiritual nutrition may, to use the botanical metaphor, come from the sap that comes invisibly from Jesus, the true vine, and through reading the Bible and partaking in the sacraments. But the



exercise comes in performing such acts of love, kindness, generosity, and the rest as are within our power at the time, and it is through doing so that our capacity for each of them is strengthened and increased.

Indeed, we may see a kind of hierarchy in the virtues – not in the sense that one is better than another, but in the sense that some are more *concrete*, closer to types of action, than others. Recall the passage from Paul’s letter to the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 13) where he extolls love as the greatest of the virtues. But the point of this is not that we should not care about other virtues, or for that matter about good deeds. Rather, the point is that love encompasses all of the rest. Jesus said that the Law is summed up in the “great commandments” to love God and one’s neighbor. (Matthew 22:40) Paul also writes that it is “summed up” in love. (Galatians 5:14) Properly speaking, kindness, generosity, gentleness, forgiveness are all manifestations of love in particular ways. But because they are more particular, they are also easier for us to understand. It does little good to tell a person “you need to be more loving”. It may be *true*, but it is too vague to provide specific guidance. But it is clearer what it might mean to be more generous or more forgiving. I may not know how to change my heart so that I *want* to help others or let go of my grievances against them, but I might still have a much clearer idea of things I can *do*, even if I do not want to do them from the heart. And the strange thing is that, in *doing* them, still half-unwillingly, my heart may begin to change. I may start out neither loving nor forgiving. I may initially forgive only because, as a Christian, I believe that the Lord commanded it. Over time, I also become a more forgiving person, one who does not cherish and hold onto grievances at past wrongs.

And in so doing, I thereby become to some extent more loving, and am freed to be loving in other ways as well: with the obstacle of my own unforgiveness removed, I can see the other person's needs and perhaps see and feel sympathy for the things that made him into the kind of person who offended me, and can more naturally be patient, kind, and generous towards him.

Aristotle claimed that the various virtues are actually part of a single harmonious whole. Christians add to this that the summation of the virtues is love, and that love is something that grows in us as a result of our relationship to God, who first loved us in Christ. Love does not come to us all at once. We need to grow into it, and often in the steps of such growth we may not recognize it as love at all, but as kindness, patience, generosity, forgiveness, or even simply as obedience to Jesus. But each of these steps is, whether we see it or not, a step upwards in ascending the ladder of divine love.

## Chapter 10

### Churches and the Church

In the previous chapters, I have attempted to lay out basic Christian beliefs about God, creation, human nature, sin, Christ, salvation, and sanctification. The overarching theme has been God’s loving relationship with human beings: that God created the world out of love and made us capable of loving him and one another, that the fundamental cause of our fallen condition is the absence of a living relationship with God, that Jesus is knocking at the doors of our hearts seeking to re-establish that relationship and give us new and everlasting life, and that when we invite him in, we are gradually transformed so as to be like him and to love as he loves.

Much of what I have said might suggest more particularly that this is a story about God’s relationships (in the plural) with *individual* human beings. This is partially correct, but it is also perilously misleading. You may well have heard Christian preachers emphasize the importance of “a personal relationship with Jesus.” And this is indeed essential to the Christian life. Yet, taken by itself, it might suggest that Christianity is *only* about *individual* salvation and spiritual growth – something that can be done in isolation, without the need for other believers or concern for the rest of the world. This would be grossly misleading. It is true that

there have been Christian hermits who have gone off into the wilderness alone, and some of these have been regarded as exemplary Christians; but this is not a model of Christian life we find in the Bible. Jesus gathered a *group* of disciples and sent them out as apostles to spread the Good News, and in his last prayer for them before his crucifixion, he prayed that they might “all be one”. (John 17:21) As the apostles spread the Good News throughout the Roman world and beyond it, they established Christian *communities* in the various places they preached, and these viewed themselves as parts of a larger community of all Christians called the Church.

Christians have always viewed themselves in these terms. They indeed believe themselves to be saved individually and to have personal relationships with God in Christ. But they are also parts of local Christian communities (“churches” with a small ‘c’) and of the all-inclusive fellowship of Christians in every place and in every age (“the Church” with a capital ‘C’). To be a Christian *is* to be a member of the Church, and is normally lived out through being part of a particular church – that is, a local Christian community.

The fact that the word ‘church’ is used both for local Christian communities and for the sum total of all Christians in every place and time can give rise to confusion. To make matters even worse, Christian houses of worship are referred to as “churches”, and so are some of the denominations of which local congregations are part – for example, The Roman Catholic Church or The Episcopal Church. And so the first task of this chapter is to try to clarify the several different things Christians mean when they speak of “a church” and “the Church”. After that, I

shall attempt to explain what Christians believe about these, and why they regard them as important components of Christian life.

### **‘Church’ – A Disambiguation**

Our English word ‘church’ is a translation of the Greek *ekklesia*, the word Christians have used for the community of Christians since New Testament times. But the uses of the English word can be very confusing. In fact, the word ‘church’ has at least four distinct meanings, only two of which are found in the Bible:

1. a building used by Christians for worship
2. a local group of Christians who meet together for worship as a community  
(for example, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Middletown, CT)
3. a Christian denomination (such as the Episcopal Church)
4. the entire collection of Christians in every age (the Church Universal).

When we first learned the word ‘church’ as children, most of us probably first used it to refer to *buildings*. By age five or so, we could probably identify which buildings were churches by the way they looked. In fact, if you haven’t been involved in a church community, you might very well *still* think of ‘church’ primarily as a word for a type of building. If so, you might be surprised to learn that, while the word appears in the New Testament many times, it is never used to refer to a building. And the reason for this is quite simple: Christians in New Testament times

did not have special buildings that they worshipped in. Often they met in someone's home. Sometimes, when they were being persecuted, they met in secret out of the way places like the catacombs under Rome. It was not until much later – several centuries later, in fact, after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire – that it became common for Christians to build special buildings for their worship, and there are still parts of the world today where Christians meet principally in people's homes. When we call a *building* “a church”, we mean that it is set aside for Christian worship.

The Greek word *ekklesia* that we translate as “church” means something like “assembly” or “gathering”. So when, say, St. Paul wrote to “the church in Corinth”, he was addressing the Christians who met together in the Greek city of Corinth. In the Biblical sense of the term, it is the *people* who are “the church”. But the word ‘church’ is used in two distinct ways in the Bible, each of which refers to groups of Christians. On the one hand, it is used in a way that encompasses all Christians, living and dead. When the word is used in this way, it is capitalized as ‘the Church’, and is also referred to as the Church Universal. There is only one Church Universal, and Christians believe that they each became a part of it in becoming Christians. On the other hand, the word is also used to refer to the Christians who meet together in particular places. In Revelation, for example, Jesus addresses “the seven churches in Asia”: those in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Here, the Christian community in each city is addressed as a distinct church. The ancient handwritten manuscripts did not employ modern conventions of capitalization, but in modern times the word ‘church’ is not

capitalized when it refers to particular Christian communities, except when it is used as part of a proper name, like “Elm Street Congregational Church”. We can also avoid the ambiguity in the word by using alternative words for local Christian communities, such as ‘congregation’ or ‘parish’. It is likely that the number of Christians in first century cities was small enough that they could all meet together and thought of themselves as a single community. So, if we were to try to think of the first-century Christians in a city such as Smyrna in modern terms, it might be easiest to think of them as something like a single congregation without a building.

Towns of similar size in the United States today would generally have dozens of churches (congregations, parishes). I live in a city of about forty thousand people, which has at least forty churches. I am a member of an Episcopal congregation named The Church of the Holy Trinity, and First Congregational Church meets in a building across the parking lot from us. There is another Congregational church at one end of Main Street and a Catholic parish at the other end, with some small independent churches occupying storefronts in-between. But churches in the sense of congregations are not counted by buildings. My parish has occupied three different buildings since its founding in the eighteenth century. (One of them still exists a block away from the current building, but is no longer a church, having been repurposed as the city library.) For several years, another church congregation that did not have a building of its own rented space from us and met in our building. And when another church in the area, Shiloh Baptist, erected a new building several years ago, they did not say “We have left Shiloh Baptist Church for another church” (which is what they *would* have said had they all decided to leave their congregation

and become part of Holy Trinity or First Church instead), but “Shiloh Baptist Church has moved to a new building.” Churches, in the sense of congregations, are communities of Christian believers.

These examples also bring us to the fourth use of the word ‘church’. Some congregations are completely independent and self-governing, with no formal connection to a larger organization. (This was the case, for example, with the group that rented space in Holy Trinity’s building.) Others are parts of larger organizations, called *denominations*. Some of these denominations use the word ‘church’ in their official names, such as The Episcopal Church and The United Churches of Christ. Others, like the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Baptist denomination in the US), do not. This usage of the word ‘church’ does not appear in the Bible, because in New Testament times the Church was not divided into denominations. The emergence of distinct Christian denominations and traditions that operate as separate institutions is something that took place over time, and the vast majority of denominations in the world today emerged out of the Protestant Reformation beginning in the sixteenth century.

## **The Church Universal**

So there are two senses of the word ‘church’ that appear in the Bible and have been regarded as important throughout Christian history. One is used as a name for the entire assembly of all Christians, living and dead: the Church, or the



Church Universal. The other is used for communities of Christians who meet and worship together in a particular place, such as the various churches, congregations, or parishes that may exist in your town. Churches, in the sense of congregations, are probably quite familiar to most people who will be reading this book. Even if you have never been a part of one, you have passed by the buildings in which they meet, perhaps heard the music of their worship wafting out, and you probably know people who are members of one or more of them. If you want to know more about what goes on in them, you have only to ask the Christians you know, many of whom will be more than happy to tell you about their church or invite you to come and see for yourself. The notion of the Church Universal, by contrast, is more likely to be unfamiliar, and more difficult to pin down. Indeed, if you ask your Christian friends to explain it, many of them may be at a loss to do so.

What does it mean when we speak of Christians in every time and place as “the Church”? There are, I think, two tempting ways of misinterpreting it which we must resist. The first is to take “the Church” to be the name of an earthly organization or institution. Organizations like the Elks Club or the Plumbers Union might be distributed around the country or even around the globe, with local chapters that are their subsidiaries, and their members are generally members both of some local chapter and of the larger organization of which it is a part. Likewise, franchise businesses like McDonald’s and Arby’s have many local franchises that are all part of a larger business. Someone who works at the local Arby’s thereby works for the Arby’s corporation, and most people who work for the corporation work at one of the local franchises. It might be tempting to see the relationship between

individual Christians, local congregations, and the Church in similar terms: that Christians are all members of a large organization called “the Church”, and local congregations are something like chapters or franchises of that larger organization. But this is not correct.

From an organizational standpoint, many congregations *are* parts of larger institutions called *denominations* – say, the Roman Catholic Church, or the United Methodist Church. But these larger institutions are not themselves part of a still-larger organizational structure, the Church. They are each independent, self-governing institutions. And indeed, there are many congregations that are themselves entirely self-governing and not part of a larger denomination. Some Christians think that they all *should* be united in a single institutional church on Earth, but it is plainly evident that in reality they are not, and many of them regard this as how God intended it. Indeed, someone who receives Christ on her deathbed and never becomes a member of any congregation or denomination is still a part of the Church Universal. So the Christian notion of the Church Universal cannot be understood in organizational terms.

This suggests a second misinterpretation: that “the Church” is simply a collective name for Christians, perhaps in something like the way we might speak of the sum total of righteous people as “the righteous” or the way Marxists refer to workers collectively as “the proletariat”. If this were the case, then the notion of the Church would not really add anything to our understanding of Christianity beyond what is involved in being an individual Christian. This would make it easy to understand why Christians hold that there is only *one* Church, however many

congregations and denominations there might be, because by definition every Christian would be included in the Church. And *that* much is correct. But this also leaves something out: the fact that Christians believe that, in becoming connected to Christ, they also become connected to all other Christians.

Christians have always had a deep sense that, in becoming Christians, they became united not only with Christ but also with one another. Indeed, this was Jesus' central concern in the final prayer that he gave before he was crucified for his followers *and all who would believe in him thereafter*:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

Jesus clearly wanted all of the people who would come to believe in him to “be one”. But what does this mean? One thing it might mean is that he wanted them to stick together, to agree, and to get along with one another. And this certainly seems to be *part* of what is meant. The letters of the New Testament frequently exhort Christians to “be of one mind” (2 Cor 13:11, 1 Peter 3:8) and to avoid factions and disputes among themselves (1 Cor 1:10-13, Titus 3:9-11).

But Jesus' prayer for unity seems to be about something more than Christians getting along and agreeing in what they believe. In the prayer quoted above, Jesus likens the unity for which he is praying to the relationship between himself and the Father. The relationships between Jesus and the Father, between Jesus and the believer, and between believer and believer all seem to be cast in terms of a deep and mystical union that begins with God and in which Christians are somehow caught up. But saying this is more likely to add to our sense of puzzlement than to

alleviate it. The nature of Jesus' relationship with the Father and how they are distinct yet one was in fact one of the most difficult things that Christian theologians tried to sort out in the early centuries of the Church. (A brief history of these discussions will be offered in Chapter [xx].) And the doctrine of the Trinity that came out of it – one God in three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) – is one that is also referred to as a *mystery* in the theological sense of a truth that we can partially grasp but which exceeds our full understanding.

When the Bible presents spiritual messages that go beyond what we can observe or readily grasp, it often uses figures and metaphors. God is spoken of as “father” and “king”. Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd and the true vine, and the New Testament also speaks of him as a high priest and as the Passover lamb. The Bible also describes the Church in figurative ways that are intended to convey spiritual truths: as God's household (1 Timothy 3:15, Ephesians 2:19), as God's temple (2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:21, 22), as the City of God, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2), as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19), and as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1:23, 4:4, 12, 16). Each of these speaks to how God dwells among us and relates to us. Jesus said that he will come and dwell with those who open the door to them, and Christians do believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in them individually. But these images suggest something more: that in some sense it is the entire Church that is Christ's dwelling, bride, and body. I shall talk about some of these metaphors in the next section. But we can also get some understanding of the idea of the Church Universal by looking at the fact that it is

understood to include all Christians – not only those who are living, but also those who have died and indeed those yet to come.

Christians believe that, when Jesus returns, the dead will be raised, and that all those who have accepted Christ as their lord will dwell with him forever. The Bible gives no more details about what this will be like than it does about what the world was like before the Fall. But presumably it will not be a matter of each individual dwelling alone with God, but a community of love with God dwelling in its midst. Christians may live their entire earthly lives in one place and as members of a single congregation, yet they believe that in the resurrection they will be united not only with those they knew in this life but also with Christians who lived in far-off places or separated by the centuries. Church buildings may crumble into dust and congregations and denominations come and go, but those who are saved in Christ will all dwell with Christ together as the Church Universal when he returns.

Christians are not all of one mind about what will happen between death and the resurrection. (Some of their views about this will be discussed in [Chapter [11]].) Some believe that there will be no conscious existence in-between, but others believe that those who have died in Christ dwell with him now, and are able to pray for the Church and the world. For those who believe this, the saints who have died are still actively involved in the life of the Church, even though their influence on earthly affairs is largely unseen.

More tangibly, the Church is something that has existed for almost two thousand years, and the faith and worship of Christians today is an inheritance passed on by previous generations. The forms of Christian prayer and worship,

their songs and hymns, and their theology were largely developed by Christians who lived long ago. The lives of the great saints and the writings of the great theologians and preachers of past ages play a large role in shaping the hearts and minds of Christians today, and presumably there are some in this generation whose lives and works will help to shape the lives of Christians of future generations. Indeed, anyone who has become a Christian heard the Good News from *someone*, and that person heard it from someone else, in an unbroken chain going back to Jesus and the apostles; and when Christians today share the Good News with others, that chain is extended. When Jesus told a small group of apostles to preach the Good News to the ends of the Earth, it must have seemed an impossibly daunting task. But in fact the message *has* been preached over almost the entire globe, and there are few places you could go today where Christianity is not represented.

The growth of the Church through the proclamation of the Good News happens in ways that do not correspond to the boundaries of congregations, denominations, or even centuries. The people who were influential in introducing me to Christ belonged to a number of different congregations and denominations, and some who have helped deepen my faith and understanding lived long ago in places like Egypt and Syria. And when we read the New Testament, we read the words of the apostles and of Jesus himself, passed down faithfully for many generations.

## Biblical Metaphors for the Church

In the last section I mentioned (not for the first time) that some of the most important Biblical ideas are presented in the form of figures or metaphors. Jesus, for example, is characterized as the good shepherd, the lamb of God, and the true vine. The most memorable ways the Bible describes the Church are also cast in the form of figurative or symbolic language, in analogies or metaphors.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of such metaphors, and they are almost as diverse as those used to characterize Jesus himself. Some apply specifically to the Church Universal, and others have applications to local Christian communities as well. They speak to different things about the Church: its relation to Christ, what kind of thing the Church is and the sense in which it is a unity, the relationship between individual Christians within the Church.

Here is a brief summary of the ways the Bible characterizes the Church: The first letter of Peter describes the Church as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” [1 Peter 2:9] Paul describes the Church to his student Timothy as “the household of God” [1 Timothy 3:15]. In a letter to the Christians at Corinth, he describes it as God’s temple, using language taken from the Hebrew Scriptures.

we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars of various types – theologians, philosophers, literary critics, linguists – make important distinctions between notions such as metaphor, analogy, symbol, figure, and type. Introducing the nuanced differences between them would have been a long digression for the reader, and I have used the terms ‘metaphor’ and occasionally ‘figure’ more or less equivalently.

“I will live in them and walk among them,  
and I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.” [2 Corinthians 6:16]

And in his letter to the Ephesians, he expands upon this theme, combining the metaphors of household and temple:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. [Ephesians 2: 19-22]

In Revelation, the Church is described as the City of God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from heaven (Revelation 21:2), and as the bride of Christ (Revelation 19). In two letters, Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1:23, 4:4, 12, 16)

This is quite an assortment of metaphors, and the meanings of some of them are clearer than others. And, because they are metaphors, we should not be concerned that they appear odd if we try to put them together as though the words bore their ordinary literal meanings. (We should not worry that, if the Church is said to be both the temple of God and the bride of Christ, it implies that Christ is going to marry a building, any more than we should puzzle over how Jesus can be a shepherd, a sheep, and the priest that sacrifices the sheep.) We should interpret them as ways of expressing things about the Church that are difficult to express in literal language, but bear important similarities with other things with which we are more familiar.



## **The Household of God**

The description that follows most naturally from ways I have characterized individual Christian life in previous chapters is that of the (adoptive) family. If Christians are each adopted as children of God, this implies that they also thereby become sisters and brothers in the Lord. Paul indeed speaks of the Church as “the household of God.” [1 Timothy 3:15, Ephesians 2:19] In this way of thinking of the Church, Jesus is the elder brother of the family, and has been given authority over the household. But it is no small family, and Jesus invites everyone to become a part of it. When a person becomes a Christian, she becomes part of a divine household that already contains many sisters and brothers, including some who have passed away long before she was born and others who live in distant lands that she will never meet in this life. And part of what it is to be a member of this household is to invite others to join it as well.

Christianity is not alone in using family and household metaphors. The idea that all people are really sisters and brothers was popular in the Enlightenment and in Romanticism. (The motto of the French Revolution, for example, was “Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood.”) And the ancient Stoic philosophers held that all rational beings are brothers and sisters in the universal “Cosmopolis” because they all share in the universal principle of Reason.<sup>3</sup> But this is not quite the same as what

Christians mean in calling one another “sister” or “brother”. One important

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the word they used for Reason – the Greek *logos* – is also the word that is translated as ‘word’ in English at the beginning of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Christians identify Jesus with the divine *logos*. However, I think it is unlikely that John was intentionally appropriating Stoic terminology.

difference is that the Biblical notion of the “household of God” is *not* something that a person is a member of simply by dint of being a human being or a creature with the capacity for reason. In a sense, the Biblical narrative *does* imply that humanity is all one huge family – the family of Adam and Eve. But in that sense the human family is a highly dysfunctional family. Indeed, in the very chapter in which we are told that Adam and Eve had sons named Cain and Abel, we are also told that Cain slew Abel! God chose the descendants of Abraham – Isaac, Jacob (who was renamed Israel), and his children – to become a special people in covenant relationship with him, but the descriptions of their family interactions strike me more as a cautionary tale than as a model of how families should behave. And if the family or household you grew up in was not a very happy and loving place, the idea of the Church as a family or household might not initially seem entirely comfortable or inviting.

In the terms discussed in Chapter [8], the dynamics we find in our human families, our communities, and humanity as a whole are part of what Christians call “the world”: the ways fallen beings interact when God is not in our midst. Christians contrast the Church with the world precisely because the Church is called to be a new form of human community – not just a *new* household, but the household *of God*, and a Godly household. And once we begin to think about it, this fits in with the entire Biblical narrative about God and humanity. Recall that in the second creation narrative, God observed that “it is not good for the man to be alone” and created a mate for him, the beginnings of the first human family. [Genesis 2:18] Before they were expelled from Eden, God walked among them in the Garden. When God called Abraham, his covenant was not just with Abraham, but with all of his descendants, a

family that became a people. The Law taught the people of the covenant how to behave with one another, and the Temple was a visible sign of God's presence in their midst. And while the great figures of the Hebrew scriptures like Moses and the prophets spent a good deal of time alone with God, their calling was to lead and instruct the people in how to be a Godly people and nation.

Christians believe that in Christ God was doing something beyond this – establishing a new type of covenant into which everyone might enter, regardless of their family or nation, and one in which God would not speak from the clouds on a mountain top or be seen as residing in a building made by human hands, but would dwell within human hearts and in the loving relationships between his adopted children. This should not be understood as a matter of *many separate* covenants between God and each individual person, but the foundation of a new form of *humanity*, with God in its midst, a humanity based not on relations of fear, suspicion, enmity, and competition, but upon divine love. This was the new commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." [John 13: 34-35]

The metaphor of a family or household is a natural way of trying to express this vision, because it is often in healthy family relations that we first and most concretely experience unconditional and self-giving love, and in healthy family relationships we have a foretaste of how God is calling people to live together. But of course not all families are healthy families, and every human family suffers from

some of the scars of fallen human nature. Some are physically and emotionally abusive, fraught with jealousy and hatred between siblings, and are sources of deep psychological wounds. And it is a rare family that is totally free of conflict, guilt, and resentment. Sisters and brothers do not always love one another; and even if they do, their relationships may be plagued by sibling rivalries that began in childhood. And for some, the family is not a place of unconditional love and acceptance, but one in which they have felt the most heartbreaking rejection or have been made to feel that they can never be good enough.

For people who have had this experience, it takes great courage to form close family-like relationships with others at all. Some may never do so. But many, when they have opportunity to do so, seek close relations with others as “family of choice” – people who love, accept, and depend upon one another. And in my experience many Christians find this, some for the first time, with people they meet in a church community: a place with wise elders willing to share a lifetime of experience, sisters and brothers committed to the same values who are working through the process of living them out together, people who assist one another when they are sick or grieving, and the ability to play a role in helping to nurture the children of the community.

### **Chosen Race, Holy Nation**

Several of the metaphors the Bible uses for the Church draw upon imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures and involve a transformation of these images in light of the Christian message. When Peter describes the Church as “a chosen race, a royal

priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," he is adapting imagery used to describe the Jews in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews are God's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham and heirs of the covenant God had made with him – a family that became a people and a nation. But Christians believe that in Christ God was doing something that goes beyond this: calling *all* people into relationship with himself, making no distinctions based upon ancestry or nationality.

The language of "a chosen race" and "a holy nation" here is metaphorical. Christians are certainly not a single ethnic group; and while there are nations where Christianity is the established religion, Christians have never sought to establish a territory they could all move to and inhabit as a single earthly nation in the way that God gave Israel a land to call its own. Indeed, quite the contrary – since Biblical times, it has been assumed that Christians would be drawn from every tribe and nation [Revelation 7:9], and that they are merely sojourners in this world, with their true home being in heaven [1 Peter 1:17, 2:11; Philippians 3:20]. The Church is in some ways like a people or a nation, but only roughly so: Human beings often understand their identity in terms of something larger of which they are a part, such as an ethnic group or a nation. The Church is a new type of collective identity for Christians, indeed their most fundamental identity, superseding their identity as residents of an earthly city, nation, family, or ethnicity. Christians are bound to one another through their common relationship with Christ, no matter how distant they may be in terms of their biological or political identities.

## **The Temple of God**

The Temple was a central fixture in Jewish religious life. Jews, like Christians, understand God to be present everywhere, but in Biblical times viewed him as present in a special way in the Temple. When Paul describes the Church as God's temple, he is not speaking of church *buildings*. Indeed, quite the contrary: he seems to be suggesting that where God is specially present is not in a building made with human hands, but in the community of people he has redeemed. If a temple is where God is understood to reside or be present, the Church – the community of people who have entered into a new relation with God through Christ – is the true temple of God. Of course, Christians also believe that the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within them individually. But the metaphor of the temple seems to be after something more than that. Individuals are likened to the blocks from which the temple is made, and in the Church they are “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

How might we understand this? One way of thinking about it is that God does come and dwell in the believer, and this is certainly as much or more than our nature can bear. As this deepens, a person becomes more like Christ – each in his or her own way – and other people are sometimes able to see Christ in them. But no one is able to reflect the fullness of Christ alone. To do that, it takes a Church full of people being transformed into Christ's likeness. Yet even this might sound as though the point is about the *sum total* of individual relationships – that the more individuals Christ dwells within, the more the fullness of his perfect nature can be realized and made manifest in saved humanity because each reflects Christ in a

unique way. And this is true, so far as it goes, but it does not capture the twice-repeated emphasis on the members of the Church being “joined together” and “built together spiritually”.

I think we can understand something of the meaning of this if we remember that Christians believe that God is love, and that even before the creation of the world, God was already in some sense a loving community of Father, Son, and Spirit. The transformation of human nature is one in which human beings come to live in and display God’s love – not only in loving God in return, but also in loving one another as brothers and sisters and in reaching out in love as Christ did to a still fallen world. Moreover, the transformation of the individual’s own nature comes about in no small measure through her interactions with her Christian sisters and brothers and her being part of God’s work in the world through the Church. And this is a gradual process in which we both grow inwardly and are knit together in love.

### **The Bride of Christ**

I have left for last what are perhaps the most striking metaphors for the Church: the bride of Christ and the body of Christ. These have always struck me as the most difficult of the metaphors to understand, yet at the same time they are also the ones that figure most prominently in theological discussions of the Church. They each speak to the intimacy, the closeness of connection, between Christ and the Church. In modern legal terms, a marriage is viewed as a voluntary contract between two individuals. But the Bible presents marriage as a much deeper

relationship, one in which a man and a woman “become one flesh”. [Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, Ephesians 5:28] It is depicted as a relationship that is – or should be – as deep as our relationship to our own bodies. Paul weaves all of this together when he describes how a husband should love his wife in his letter to the Ephesians:

husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:28-33)

Christ’s relationship with the Church is as close as that of a husband and wife – in some sense, the two become one – and Christ loves the Church in the way that a husband ought to love his wife, which is, in turn, as deeply as we love our own bodies.

The depiction of the Church as the bride of Christ is most explicit in the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation, where the author is describing a vision of Christ’s return. Christ is characterized here as the Lamb of God, and his return is described as a marriage and wedding feast, his bride being the Church.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,  
“Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God  
the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready;

to her it has been granted to be clothed  
with fine linen, bright and pure”—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.



And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” [Revelation 19: 6-9]

A careful reading of this passage shows that, while the Church is described as the Bride of Christ, this does not mean that it is already his *wife*. Rather, the Church on Earth is more like a bride-to-be, preparing for the wedding day by clothing herself with the righteous deeds of the saints – that is, those who are being made holy. Being a man and never married, I have little direct experience with wedding preparations. But I often marvel at the care and attention that brides put into the planning, trying to make sure that everything is perfect. I confess that there are aspects of it that my male mind seems ill-suited to understand, as my “sensible” masculine suggestions (“Why not just use your mother’s dress – it was only worn once?” or “Why not just have a buffet at the restaurant down the block?”) draw dark stares from all of the women in the room. But I can well appreciate that, if Christians and their churches put the same kind of fervor into preparing to meet Jesus that brides put into their wedding preparations, we would be far better Christians. One could hardly ask for a better metaphor to convey the kind of spirit in which a person prepares for her much-awaited union with the one she loves.

### **The Body of Christ**

I think that it is the final figurative way the Bible speaks of the Church – as the Body of Christ – that provides the most insight into the importance of the Church as something more than a collection of individuals. Paul develops this idea in his first letter to the Corinthians:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. [1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27]

This passage turns upside-down the way we might normally think of the relationship between individuals and the Church. You can observe individual Christians, churches, and denominations, and from an earthly standpoint, they just look like individual human beings, communities, and organizations. There might be many interesting things to observe about them, just as looking at a living body through a microscope you could make fascinating observations about cells, neurons, and blood vessels. But the focal field of a microscope is too narrow to reveal what unites them all and gives meaning to what each of them is doing: the fact that they are all parts of a single living body. Similarly, we cannot understand the nature of the Church simply by examining individual believers, communities, or denominations. The figure of the Church as the Body of Christ provides a way of understanding things about the Church: its relation to Christ, the relation of Christians to one another, how the Church is a unity, and the Church’s role in Christ’s ongoing work.

The Church is described not only as *a* body, but as *Christ's* body. In part this means that the Church is the flesh and blood through which Christ continues his ministry on earth. The Good News is Christ's message, but it is the Church that now proclaims it. The love that animates the Church is divine love, but it is in the Church that this love is made manifest, not only through how Christians love one another, but also through the ways they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and proclaim Good News to those who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. [Matthew 9:36] Indeed, to the extent that the Church is alive, the life within it is Christ's life, and when people perceive God's life and love at work in the Church, they see Christ.

Moreover, the way in which the Church is said to be "one" is likened to the way in which the various parts of a living body are united by being parts of the same organism. The unity of the Church does not consist in its members all being alike – indeed, quite the contrary. A "body" made up entirely of feet would be no body at all, but a monstrosity. Nor is it simply the sum total of the parts, like a body after an autopsy. A living body is one in which there are many different parts that do different things that support their mutual life and health. It is only such a living and healthy body that can do things in the world, and each of the parts is able to live, thrive, and indeed be the sort of thing it is meant to be only by dint of its relations with the rest of the body. If a part of the body were to say to itself that it had no need of the rest of the body, it would be fooling itself. If the foot were to say "I could walk faster and farther if I did not have to carry this body along with me" it would

be mistaken. A foot cannot walk anywhere on its own, nor can it sustain itself without the blood vessels or know where to walk without the nerves and head.

All of this suggests a deep *interdependence* between Christians. And this interdependence is twofold. First, the context of this passage is Paul's discussion of the variety of gifts and ministries that different Christians have. Some are called to proclaim the Good News to non-Christians, others to give instruction to Christians or to distribute food and clothing to those who are in need. Some have gifts of building other people up, showing mercy to others, or challenging them when they go wrong. Some have plenty of money but little time to do works of ministry themselves, and they help to support those who are devoting themselves to full-time ministry. Jesus called his followers not only to spread the Good News and to pass on all that he had taught them, but also to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit those in prison. These have proven to be never-ending tasks, and are not things that can be done effectively by individuals on their own. The Church is able to do them only through its many members working together. And for much of the time it has existed, the Church was the primary provider of medical services, care for orphans, and alms for the poor. In the past century, these have largely been performed by government-sponsored social services in the developed world, but there are still places in the developing world where people have food, drinkable water, and medical attention only because of the work of Christian missionaries who are funded by donors in churches around the world who will never travel to those places themselves. Such charitable work is also done more locally by congregations in their own communities.

The second aspect of Christian inter-dependence is that Christians grow spiritually through their interactions and common life with one another. Much of this, however, takes place within their local churches, which we will now turn to in the next section.

## **Churches as Local Christian Communities**

Why do Christians believe that being part of a local Christian community is important? I shall explore four reasons. First, participation in Christian community is something that the Bible exhorts Christians to do, and was the practice of Jesus' own ministry and that of the early Church. Second, it plays an important role in the spiritual development of Christians. Third, to the extent that a church becomes a community of Godly love, it provides an important kind of witness to the Good News that draws others to Christ. And fourth, many of the things that Jesus commanded his followers to do, such as taking care of the poor, the sick, the hungry, the widows and orphans, can only be done effectively by a group or community.

Jesus did not pursue his earthly ministry alone. He had a small *community* of disciples who travelled with him together, and they continued to be a community after his death, resurrection, and ascension. He clearly intended that they continue to be a community when he would no longer be present in the flesh, as his last prayer was that they, and all those who would come after them, would be one. This community grew after Pentecost. Acts 2 tells of a period in which there was a

growing community, centered around the apostles in Jerusalem, that practiced a fairly radical form of community life, in which no one regarded their wealth or their property as their own, but sold their possessions and brought their money to the apostles to be distributed to those in need. They met together on Sundays to worship God together, but also took care of one another's material needs and built one another up spiritually, and they supported the apostles' work of spreading the Good News. Over time, many of the apostles travelled to other places, and those who received the Good News in those places formed communities and met together as well. The various churches to which letters of the New Testament are addressed – for example, those in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, and Ephesus – were among these, and Acts mentions many other towns where Christian communities sprang up as well.

The Bible indeed exhorts Christians to meet together as an essential part of their Christian life:

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

And this exhortation is combined with *reasons* for meeting together: to encourage one another and to provoke one another to love and to good deeds. Being part of a church is not simply a matter of belonging to an organization, nor is a church just a kind of club for people with shared beliefs and interests. It is a vital necessity, because without interaction with other Christians, a person is likely to become discouraged or to lose sight of what the new life they have embarked upon is really about.

This need was perhaps particularly acute for the new Christians in the Roman cities to which the New Testament letters were addressed. After all, they had previously lived their lives as pagans and were still living in a pagan world that did not share their values and looked upon them with hostility and suspicion. It would have been all too easy to slip back into the very things from which they had been saved. But is it really all that different today? We may not have ever worshipped Jupiter or Mars, but we probably have all been deeply affected by the idols of our own age, such as the pursuit of wealth, power, fame, or prestige. Our workplaces may be soul-crushing environments that reward those who push others down in order to claw their way to the top and which treat customers as resources to be exploited. We are bombarded by advertising messages that tell us we need to be more beautiful and buy expensive things to confirm our worth and importance. Even our friendships and families may be tainted with control, shame, jealousy, resentment, and anger. And we all have our own inner traumas, wounds, compulsions, and grudges. Even if a person has been saved in Christ, she still lives in a fallen world, and the effects of the fall have not been fully remedied within her. No matter how firm our intention to live a holy life, it is easy to come home at the end of the day feeling completely mired in the still-fallen world we have had to wade through, and we may not even notice how our own still-partially fallen nature has responded to it with dark moods of anger, bitterness, fear, hopelessness, or resentment.

It is impossible to fully remove ourselves from the fallen world around us. Part of what Christian community does, at least when it is working properly, is to

provide a second and alternative community in which to live and grow. It will never be a *perfect* community, because it is made up of people who (like ourselves) are still imperfect. But it is made up of people who share a relationship with Jesus and a common hope of salvation and sanctification, and who are committed to a life of love, forgiveness, and sanctifying transformation. We learn from one another. We practice virtues such as hope, forbearance, and forgiveness. We remind and encourage one another about the things we are committed to. And sometimes we confront and correct one another as well. It is not that you will not encounter personality conflicts, grudges, disagreements, or power struggles within a church as well as in the world outside the church. But the church is – or should be – a community in which people are committed (even if they sometimes forget those commitments) to giving up and growing beyond such things in response to Jesus' love and commandments.

A saying that I heard many years ago that has stuck with me is that “the Church is a halfway house for sinners, not a country club for saints.” Those who come to Christ do so bruised and damaged, still imperfect and in need of forbearance and forgiveness. Each of us might like to find a perfect community. Yet if we did so, we would find ourselves the odd man or woman out, because we ourselves are far from perfect. If churches are to be places of Christian growth, they must indeed be something more like halfway houses or twelve-step meetings, places where someone at any stage on the road to sanctification can come and be accepted. And, like halfway houses or twelve-step groups, they must be places where those who are new to the process can learn from those who are more experienced.



This may be a very different image of church community from what you might have supposed. You might have thought that Christians believe that “good people” (whatever that means) go to church, while “bad people” spend Sunday mornings hung over from the night before. But the proper Christian view is that we are all fallen human beings, and that the only thing that distinguishes Christians is that they have accepted salvation in Christ and set out upon the road to sanctification. The Holy Spirit that comes to dwell in those who have been saved is crucial in this, but the testimony of the ages is that it also takes association with more experienced and wiser Christians who have been through many of the same things we are facing and can pass along some of this wisdom and encourage us along the way. And as we progress, we also pass it along to others.

Part of this assistance, of course, comes from the official leaders of a church – the bishop, priests, pastors, ministers, deacons, elders, vestry, bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers, and so on. If a church is working properly, the people appointed to such positions will be wise and experienced in the Christian life, and have the gifts to lead others in it. But part of it also comes from our associations with the many other people who are part of the church: From this person I learned how to endure the loss of a loved one. From that person I learned how to deal with illness or misfortune. From another I learned how to be patient or forgiving. Sometimes I learned by watching how they acted. Sometimes I learned from how they treated me.

By the same token, our fellow Christians also give us opportunities to live and grow precisely because of the ways they are imperfect. My brother sins against

me, and Jesus commands me to forgive, so I must learn how to forgive my brother, however difficult that might be. My sister is annoying and tries my patience, yet I am called to be patient, and so I must learn to be forbearing. I disagree about something important with another member of the church, but Jesus calls us to be of one mind, so I must examine my own views and also take my brother's or sister's views more seriously and pray and strive to be of one mind together. In the process, we may each learn something, and we may both grow in our understanding of the matter about which we disagreed. But, perhaps more importantly, we also learn how to live in loving relationship even while we are in disagreement.

These are all things that are difficult for someone imbibed in the individualistic culture in which I and many modern western people live. We have the idea that we should be our own people, and not be defined by others. We seek like-minded people – the more like-minded the better. And the Bible indeed exhorts Christians to “be like-minded”. [1 Peter 3:8, NIV] But what is it to be “like-minded”? On one interpretation, this might mean finding people who share all of our views. We certainly rejoice when we find like-minded people, and these are often the people who become our friends. But if you insist on this too far, you start to exclude anyone who disagrees with you about anything. Go down this road, and the checklist just gets longer and longer, and you are left alone.

Here is another way of looking at like-mindedness. Christians all believe that we are sinners, saved by the grace of God through Christ. We believe that everything about us – our beliefs, our desires, our habits – need to be fundamentally transformed. When we look about us and see a diversity of beliefs, desires, and

habits in other Christians, this is simply a sign that we are each somewhere on the road to perfection. Of course, some things are just matters of taste. But there are plenty of matters where each of us thinks that *our* way is right, and we try to persuade one another of its rightness. But as Christians, we must also be open to the possibility that we ourselves have gotten something wrong, and that it is far more profitable to us to be corrected in our errors than to correct others. To deny this possibility is the sin of spiritual pride, and pride is regarded by Christians as the deepest and most fundamental of sins. The opposite of pride is the virtue of humility. Indeed, the verse about like-mindedness quoted above goes on to emphasize the importance of humility. “Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.” (1 Peter 3:8, NIV) But humility can be exercised only in a common life with other believers, and in openness to the possibility of learning from them.

And here is the hard thing. To be members of a church, we must commit ourselves to some particular community. And that will always be a community not fully of one’s own choosing. It will include people with whom one disagrees and who do things one disapproves of. And it will also include people who disagree with you and people who disapprove of things you do. You can look for a way to minimize this – a church that shares most of your views and that has no problem with most of the things that your do – but it will never be perfect. And *that is probably for the best*, because *you* and *I* are not yet perfect, and one of the most important ways that we are brought along the road to perfection is by being challenged by one another. Of course, not all challenges are persuasive. I might

think that Jesus' teachings imply total nonviolence, and others might think that there are wars that are just, and in the end neither of us might persuade the other. Baptists and Methodists might think that a Christian should never drink alcohol, and others might disagree. Yet in challenging one another, we lead one another to consider what Christ would have us do. And this leads us forward in the path to sanctification. We should not expect that we will be made perfect in this life, but we should strive onward towards perfection.

What I hope to have conveyed in this section is that being part of a Christian community – a church, congregation, parish, or assembly – is a crucial part in this process. Christ *saves* us individually, but also calls us into community, and it is partly through this community with God at its center that we are sanctified and brought to perfection. On the one hand, the community is something that is an alternative to the world – a group of people with a shared Lord and shared ideals. On the other hand, within this community we experience many conflicts that inspire us to change and to grow.

In addition to the benefits that Christian community provides to its members, local church communities are also meant to be places that display the love of God and call others to the Good News. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” [John 13:35] The ways in which the members of a church care for and assist one another should be a visible sign of God's love at work amidst them. Of course, not every church displays this type of love. Some might be cold to one another, or to outsiders. Some might have a culture that is downright toxic. If you are seeking a church for the first time, or have moved

to a new community, there is much to be said for visiting churches and getting a feel for them before joining one, and you might want to think twice before joining a congregation where you do not feel welcomed, or where there is obvious strife. It is always possible to leave one congregation and join another, but Christians who have been a part of one congregation for a long time often feel committed to a particular group of people, and are thus inclined to try to make *that* congregation as good as it can be, even if there are deep problems or they are not being spiritually fed. When we are without a church home, we have the liberty of seeking one where people love one another, are being fed spiritually, and are showing the love of God to the world through word and deed.

And this brings us to a third important function of the local congregation: it is often the primary place through which Christ's work is carried out in the world. The things Jesus commanded his followers to do – to preach the Good News, to assist the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the widows and orphans – are often things that we cannot effectively do *individually*. They can be done much better through a congregation working collectively. Just what form this takes will depend on the needs of the community and the resources of the congregation. My own parish, for example, is located on Main Street in a city of about forty thousand. We have a large downtown building, which we have offered as space for a number of functions over the years. Our space is used as an overflow shelter for the homeless in the winter months and for the summer free lunch program for children in our city, and we collect used clothing that we offer without charge to people who cannot afford to buy new clothes. And over the years, a number of different programs that serve

people in need have gotten their start under our roof: the local soup kitchen, a summer theater program for children and youth, the Head Start preschool program, alcohol and drug rehabilitation services, and a free transportation service for seniors, to name a few. And, like many churches, we offer space to the meetings of twelve-step programs throughout the week. We have also undertaken partnerships with foreign missions, such as raising money for wells and mosquito nets for a village in Africa. Some of these are things that would probably not have happened without us, and few are things that any member of the church could have accomplished individually. They are ways in which one particular Christian church has helped carry out Christ's work of responding to the needs of the world in one particular community. Other churches, in our community and others, have responded to different needs using the particular gifts and resources at their disposal. Each such act may seem a small thing in itself, and a church may feel that, despite its efforts, it has made hardly a dent in the problems of its own community, much less the world. But each leaves the world better than it was, and the sum total of the works done by local churches around the world is one way that the Church operates as Christ's body in the world, spreading the Good News and doing the works that he commanded.

**[11]****When Christians Disagree**

At the beginning of this book, I noted the apparent audacity of trying to answer the question, “What do Christians believe?” After all, there are something on the order of two billion people alive today who self-identify as Christians, and they certainly disagree about many things. Of course, many of the things they disagree about have little or nothing to do with their Christianity. But some are very much about what one should believe or do as a Christian, and in a few cases these even rise to a level such as to raise doubts about who really counts as a Christian. Some denominations have adopted statements of doctrine that are at odds with those of other denominations. And within any denomination, there are likely to be people who are members of the denomination yet dissent from some points of its official doctrine.

It is of course impossible to talk about *all* of the things that Christians disagree about among themselves. What I want to do in this chapter is to discuss a select few that are historically important *theological* disagreements. Some of these arose early in the history of the Church, and were settled in ways that contributed to what became Christian orthodoxy. Others are still important points of disagreement between Christians of different denominations today, and in some cases issues

where the disagreements do not break down along denominational lines. One thing I wish to convey in this presentation is that, with the exception of some of the positions that were rejected early in the history of the Church, these are disagreements in which all parties would agree on the basic commitments I have outlined in this book – commitments to God, creation, sin and fallenness, salvation through Christ, and sanctification through the Holy Spirit. By this, I do not mean that Christians all have exactly the same beliefs about, say, how salvation *works*, but that they share a basic commitment to the view that human beings are in need of salvation and that this is offered through Christ. Similarly, Christians quite generally believe that, after they die, they will continue to exist and be with Christ, even though they may have different ideas about what this will be like – for example, whether it will be in Heaven or in resurrected bodies on a recreated Earth.

The reason further disputes arose is that, while the Bible and early Christian tradition were clear enough about basic themes like Christ, sin, and salvation, they left a number of very reasonable questions unanswered. In the New Testament, Jesus is presented both as a human being and as God, but this quite naturally raises questions about how both of these things can be true at once. The Bible likewise makes it clear that everyone is a sinner and in need of salvation, and that those who are saved will live with Christ after their bodily deaths, but it does not spell out answers to all of the questions one might have about how all this works. The Bible is not any kind of theoretical treatise. Jesus taught largely in parables. The letters of the New Testament are addressed largely to specific situations. The early Christians were more concerned with spreading the Good News and



instructing those who received it in how to live Godly lives than with constructing a theological system. But many Christians did try to work out answers to questions that arose from their basic commitments, and they did not all come up with the same answers. The Church came to the project of uniting its beliefs in a more comprehensive and theoretical form only gradually, partly as a result of dealing with controversies as they arose and partly as more philosophically-minded theologians sought to work out the questions that arose when they attempted to work out a more comprehensive system of Christian belief. This inevitably forced them to think about issues in ways that went beyond what the first Christians had written about, and probably what they had even thought about, and beyond what could be definitively established by proof texts from the Bible.

What I shall do in this chapter, then, is to look at how a number of important questions arose from the basic Christian commitments, to attempt to make the major positions intelligible as possible answers to those questions, and in the case of those issues that were settled, to make clear which positions became defined as Christian orthodoxy and the reasons for those decisions. As I say, the issues I shall discuss will be *theological* issues – issues about God, Christ, and salvation. There are, of course, many other matters on which there are also important questions about what a Christian *should* believe, and about which Christians disagree. Some Christians, for example, believe that Christians should not drink alcohol or dance. Some are opposed to divorce, or to abortion, or to any form of violence or participation in the military. They think that these issues are important, and that there are things that Christians *should* believe on these matters. But such beliefs are

not definitive of what one needs to believe to count as a Christian at all, and so they fall outside of the scope of this book.

## **Disagreements in New Testament Times**

I shall begin with some of the disagreements we find evidence of within the New Testament itself. Jesus admonished his disciples to “be of one mind”, and the letters of the New Testament also discourage disputes and factions. But this is the kind of advice that is given only when there *are* disputes going on, and Paul and other writers often adopt a tone that indicates that they disagreed with things the recipients of their letters were saying or disapproved of things they were doing.

It may come as a surprise to some modern readers that one of the first important crises to face the early Christians was the question of whether people who were not Jews (gentiles) could become Christians. Today, we tend to think of Judaism and Christianity as distinct and perhaps even mutually-exclusive religions. But the word ‘Jew’ is ambiguous in a way that ‘Christian’ is not. It can signify both an ethnic identity and a religious affiliation, and there are people who are ethnically but not religiously Jewish, as well as people who are not ethnically Jewish who have adopted Judaism as their religion. (In the New Testament, these are referred to as “proselytes” or “God-fearing people”.) But recall that Jesus and all of his disciples were both ethnically and religiously Jewish. In the Gospels, Jesus is clearly regarded as a Jewish teacher, even if some of the religious authorities viewed him as a

heretical one. One of the things that he did that raised the eyebrows of the religious authorities was to interact with gentiles, which violated their understanding of the purity laws. But this was not the same thing as repudiating Judaism in favor of one of the Greek philosophies or one of the pagan religions, much less starting an utterly new religion. Jesus' disciples, moreover, came to view him as the Jewish Messiah. After Jesus' resurrection, they even asked whether he was about to restore the kingdom to Israel. And if, in the Great Commission, Jesus commanded the apostles to preach the Good News "to the ends of the Earth," there were, after all, *Jews* in far-flung places whom he might have meant.

In any case, it seems clear from the Book of Acts that the first gentile conversions came as quite a shock to the apostles. In Acts 10, Peter receives a vision – not once, but three times – before being sent to a Roman centurion named Cornelius to share the Good News with him. When Cornelius and those with him receive it, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter is amazed and baptizes them. He then feels the need to share this with the other apostles, who deliberate over it and, on the basis of his testimony, agree that the Good News has been extended to gentiles as well. The harder question seems to have been whether gentile converts should *also* be required to become Jewish proselytes and to keep all of the Jewish laws (such as the dietary and dress laws and for men to be circumcised). Acts 15 reports that the apostles decided collectively that gentile converts would be permitted to retain their customary food and dress (with the exception of being forbidden to eat blood or meat that had been strangled or offered to pagan idols), and to remain uncircumcised.

We do, however, see evidence in the New Testament that the issue did was not immediately resolved. Paul seems to have had his own occasion to argue for preaching the Good News to gentiles. (Gal 2:11-14) Both his letters and those of John suggest that there continued to be Christians through the first century who insisted on a closer adherence to Jewish tradition. And there is reason to believe that the Church in Jerusalem, in particular, did so through much of the first century. Nothing in the Bible *prohibits* the continuation of Jewish customs. It simply suggests that they are not *required* of Christian converts. Indeed, there are many ethnically Jewish people today who are also Christians – sometimes called “messianic Jews” – who also observe the Jewish feasts as a part of their Jewish identity and to mark the history of God’s saving actions with the Jewish people.

A second issue we see in the New Testament is also closely connected to the relation between Christianity and Judaism: the relation between “faith” and “works”. Within Judaism, righteousness was understood in terms of adherence to the Law, and sins were seen as violations of the Law. It was a common theme in Judaism that no one fully kept the Law, but there were sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. Christians came to believe that Christ was the one perfect sacrifice for sin, and that adherence to some parts of the Law were not even required for Christians. But the Law – or at least the *moral* parts of the Law like “do not kill”, as opposed to things like the dietary provisions – is also a guide to goodness, and so there remained a question of the relationship between salvation in Christ and doing good works.

We see discussions of this in the letters of Paul and James. Paul stresses that Christians are saved through faith and not through works (Romans 3:28, Galatians

2:16, Ephesians 2:8-9), and James that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

(James 2:17) On the surface, this might seem to be evidence of a deep disagreement.

But in fact each acknowledges the importance of both faith and works. Paul’s point is that we cannot *earn* salvation through what we do, and in particular that we cannot do so through fulfilling the Law of Moses. James does not dispute this. His point is that, if someone is truly living out a life of faith, this will bear the fruit of good works as well. You can imagine them arguing with one another, but you can also well imagine that they would each reflect on what the other said and realize that the other had an important insight that complemented and deepened his own. And this is a very important point: a Christian’s understanding – even an apostle’s understanding – of Jesus’ message is always a work in process. Jesus’ life-giving message is very rich, and was not given in the form of a theory or a comprehensive set of prescriptions. A person may be deeply influenced by one part of it yet not understand it completely, or how it relates to other parts. And this is one of the reasons it seems important that Jesus left a *community* of believers behind. One person might understand one thing well, and another might understand something else, but it is only in sharing our insights in community that we come to see a broader picture, and sometimes the path to seeing this broader picture comes only by way of working through disagreements.

Another set of issues that confronted the early Church concerned the relation between salvation, baptism, and sin. Conversion to Christianity was understood as a renunciation of sin and acceptance of Christ as savior, and in baptism one’s sins were understood to be washed away. One thing this means is that one’s *previous*

sins – *pre*-baptismal sins, if you will – are forgiven. But what about *after that*? What if a person sins after having been baptized?

There are two sets of issues here. The first is whether Christian baptism is *merely* for the forgiveness of (past) sins. In Acts 18, we encounter a man named Apollos, who is preaching in the name of Jesus, but is only administering “the baptism of John [the Baptist]” – that is, baptism for forgiveness of sins. Apollos had never heard of the Holy Spirit, and this was an important point of difference between what he was doing and what the apostles were doing. After being instructed by the a couple named Priscilla and Aquila who had heard the Gospel from Paul, Apollos became an important Christian evangelist in his own right. But in this story we see an important point being defined in early Christian doctrine – that baptism is not just about forgiveness of sins, but also about a deeper change in one’s inner being in which God’s Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the believer.

There is reason to think, however, that the first Christians initially supposed that, after one had accepted Christ and been baptized, one would never sin again. This quickly proved to be an unrealistically optimistic view, and in the longer run the Church concluded that the process of sanctification is usually one that is life-long and indeed is seldom completed in this life. But the more immediate question was what to do when a Christian fell into sin. Was her salvation lost? Did she need to start over and be re-baptized? This issue was particularly acute in the case of Christians who publicly renounced their faith under persecution (whether sincerely or as a pretense to save their lives), both in the persecutions in New Testament times and those under the Emperor Diocletian in the fourth century. There were

Christians who took very harsh views on this: that those who had done so had permanently lost their salvation, or that they needed to be re-baptized, or that they required a particularly long penance before being re-admitted to full communion with the Church. The view that prevailed, however, was that salvation and baptism are one-time affairs, not to be repeated. This gave rise to the practices of confession and penance for sins that a person commits after becoming a Christian.

There are also important questions about the relationship between baptism and acceptance of Christ as one's savior. In the first accounts of conversions in Acts, these were closely connected: people heard the Good News, accepted it, and were quickly baptized. But in Acts 10 and 16 we also have stories of whole families being baptized together, and presumably some members of those families were children too young to understand what they were doing. The Church began the practice of baptizing infants very early, and certainly infants are not in a position to make the kind of conscious acceptance of Christ that adults can. In the Reformation, some Christians would take the view that baptism makes sense only as a part of a person accepting salvation and making a commitment to Christ, and hence that infant baptisms are invalid. This is the origin of the terms "Anabaptist" and "Baptist", which are names of Christian traditions that practice baptism only with adults or children old enough to be able to make their own decision to accept Christ. However, most of the churches that practice infant baptism also see the need for an adult act of public commitment to Christ, which is often called "confirmation". Those who practice infant baptism and those who baptize only adults agree that both baptism and an explicit acceptance of the Good News are important. What they

disagree about are what this implies for when a person should be baptized and what counts as a valid baptism.

## The Process of Defining Orthodoxy

The last books of the New Testament were probably completed around the end of the first century. In the surviving literature from the second through fifth centuries, we can see evidence of a number of controversies that helped to shape Christian orthodoxy as we know it today. The word ‘orthodox’ is derived from two Greek words. *Orthos* means “straight” – an orthodontist, for example, is someone who straightens teeth. *Doxa* means “belief”. So “orthodox” means something like “having beliefs that line up properly”. But there are two ways that beliefs might “line up” – with *other people’s* and with *the truth*. Of course, those who define a set of beliefs as orthodox assume that these should go together: that the beliefs that they have agreed upon are also *correct*. But why would the project of defining an orthodox position come to be seen as important at all? Generally, it is the sort of situation that occurs only when there is in fact already disagreement *within* a religious community over questions that are regarded being of crucial importance. Those beliefs that differ from those deemed orthodox are typically called “heterodox” (other-believing) or “heretical” (having broken away and formed their own doctrine).



Many Christian denominations today have carefully worked out statements of doctrine. But it is important to understand that these are products of centuries of theological discussion and debate. When Jesus ascended, he did not leave the disciples with a volume on theoretical theology. He left them with the Great Commission to preach the Good News and baptize those who accepted it, and on Pentecost they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They believed that he had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, and that this brought the possibility of salvation. And like other Jews, they believed the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures: that God had created the world and given the Law, that we are all sinners under the Law, that God had formed a covenant with Israel, and that God wishes to reconcile human beings with himself. It probably took them a while to think through how God's new revelation in Christ transformed their previous religious understanding as Jews, as we discussed in the last section. They also came to regard Jesus as "Lord", as God, and as "the Son of the Father" and believed that God sent his own Holy Spirit into their hearts. But they also believed that Jesus had truly lived a human life and died on the cross. These commitments left a number of questions waiting in the wings about how to fit these beliefs together: just what sort of being was Jesus? How was he related to the Father and the Spirit? Are Christians committed to one God or three? It was quite natural that Christians would eventually think through such questions, and that they would consider it important to find the right answers to them. The process seems to have developed slowly – over centuries – and in part as a result of Christians reaching differing conclusions and then having to argue out their disagreements.

### **Christianity and Gnosticism**

The most serious early challenge to what was to become the orthodox view came from Gnosticism. By the early second century, Christian writers like Irenaeus of Lyons used the term *gnostikos* (originally meaning a learned person or intellectual) for the adherents of several sects they viewed as threats to proper Christian belief. *Gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge, and knowledge played a central role in Gnosticism. Gnostics held that the real key to salvation was not acceptance of Christ through faith, but a kind of secret spiritual knowledge that was distinct from the public teachings of the Church, and often in some ways in tension with the plain sense of what were to become the canonical Biblical texts. We have seen what is perhaps the most extreme form of this in Marcion's complete repudiation of the Hebrew Scriptures and his claim that the God presented in them is in fact the devil. But "Gnosticism" is a kind of blanket term given to a number of distinct religious views that emphasize secret mystical knowledge, some within Christianity and others outside it, and most Christian Gnostics did not share Marcion's extreme views. But they did attempt to unite their own interpretation of the person and teachings of Jesus with other views of the God, the universe, and humanity, in some cases derived from pagan mythology and mystery religions and in others from Platonistic philosophy.

As we have seen in previous chapters, Gnostics believed in a dualistic universe: a spiritual realm associated with goodness and light, and a material realm associated with evil and darkness. Their diagnosis of the human condition was based in this assumption about the universe. Some Gnostics believed that some

human beings are by nature “children of light” and others “children of darkness”, others that we are all really divine sparks entangled in matter, with our minds confused by the darkness. In either case, the key to salvation is to gain a correct *understanding* of our plight through Gnostic teachings, which will then allow us to be freed from the grips of the ignorance imposed by the material world. For them, Jesus came principally to show or teach us how to be released from our earthly prison, and sin was largely a consequence of ignorance of our own nature and of the nature of reality, and of our being trapped in material bodies. Some Gnostics believed that such salvation through enlightened knowledge could, in principle, be achieved by everyone, while others believed that it was reserved for those who were already “children of light” by their intrinsic nature, or for an intellectually and spiritually gifted few.

Gnosticism was a diverse movement. Those Gnostics who made Jesus a part of their religion and shared some of the Christian scriptures are sometimes called “Gnostic Christians” or “Christian Gnostics”, but many Christians would regard even their views as sufficiently different to count as another religion altogether. And the differences are not confined to abstract intellectual theology. They have concrete practical implications for what kind of spiritual life you pursue. If you believe that the material world is a dark prison, you will take a very different attitude towards the world and towards your own body than if you believe them to be the good (but fallen) handiwork of a good and loving God. If you take your neighbor to be an irredeemable child of darkness, or even mired in ignorance, you will regard her differently than if you see her as a fellow sinner whom God longs to adopt as his

own child. And the pursuit of esoteric knowledge leads in very different directions from a desire to be forgiven from sin and transformed through a living relationship with God in Christ. At their cores, Gnosticism and Christianity offer very different views, not only of what we should believe, but how we should live and what we should love. The early Christians certainly did not oppose knowledge in favor of ignorance, but tended to view Gnosticism as something very different from the Christianity passed on by the apostles, and the Gnostics agreed that they were preaching different doctrines.

### **Christ's Divinity and Humanity**

But the early centuries also saw controversies about how to develop core Christian doctrines, particularly how to understand the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God the Father and the Holy Spirit. (In theological terms, these are called “Christological” questions.) The Gospels clearly present Jesus as having lived a real human life: they describe him as being born at a particular time and place, and as eating, sleeping, weeping, sweating, bleeding, and dying. But they also describe him as being God, the Son of God, and the Lord of all creation. The beginning of John’s Gospel states Jesus’ divinity quite directly, and it is strongly implied elsewhere as well. But the idea that someone is human and the idea that he is God do not rest easily together. To a pious Jew, the claim that a man was also God would have sounded blasphemous. Pagans also saw gods and mortals as different types of beings, though they believed their gods sometimes walked among us disguised as

ordinary mortals. Thoughtful Christians would inevitably have to confront the question of just what sort of being Jesus really was.

By the early second century, there were clearly people (called Docetists) who believed that Jesus was divine, but only *appeared* to be human. As a result, they believed that he did not truly suffer and die on the cross, but only appeared to do so. Likewise, there were others (called Adoptionists) who believed that Jesus started out as a human being like any other but, unlike the rest of us, led a fully righteous life under the Law and, as a consequence, was adopted and divinized by God because of his righteousness. And there were others, including some of the Gnostic groups and a fourth-century movement called Arianism, who hit upon yet another possibility: that Jesus was neither God nor human, but something in-between. All of them believed that Jesus was special and unique in the history of the world, but they had different views about what kind of being Jesus was, how salvation comes about, and what we shall become by virtue of being saved.

No doubt there were Christians who accepted Christ as their savior without ever having thought through such questions, but we can also see how the different theories could lead to very different conclusions. For example, if Jesus was not truly human and only appeared to suffer and die, salvation certainly cannot come through his suffering and death. Conversely, if Jesus was a man who was divinized for his goodness, salvation is something that is earned by what we do. Perhaps other good people can be divinized as well on the basis of their own righteousness too, or perhaps Jesus was unique in living a completely righteous life; but either way, no

hope is offered for those of us who are sinners. Had either of these views won out, we would have been left with a very different religion.

### **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**

Docetism and Adoptionism died out quickly as movements as the Church adopted the somewhat more difficult and paradoxical view that Jesus was both human and divine. But this, in turn, led to further questions. If Jesus was God as well as human, was he identical with the God presented in the Hebrew Scriptures? If so, why did he refer to God as his Father, as though they were two distinct individuals? (A matter only further complicated by the question of how to fit the Holy Spirit into the picture.) But if Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit were distinct individuals, each of them divine, that would seem to imply that there was more than one God – in direct contradiction with the central tenet of Judaism, also embraced by Christians, that “God is one.” It is a collection of beliefs that are very difficult to reconcile with one another – so much so that Jews and Moslems tend to regard Christians as tritheists (people who believe in three gods rather than one).

By the beginning of the third century, there was also an alternative view known as Modalism (also called Sabellianism and Patripassianism) that attempted to avoid the conclusion that there is more than one God by proposing that “Father”, “Son”, and “Spirit” are really just three *names* for *one* God, distinguished by three different ways or *modes* in which the one God operates – say, as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. This preserves the unity of God, but makes it very difficult to make sense of passages in the Bible that seem to speak of Father, Son, and Spirit as three

distinct individuals, such as when Jesus prays to the Father or when, at Jesus' baptism, a voice says "This is my son." (Matt 3:17, Luke 9:35)

By the early fourth century, another alternative had emerged, called Arianism (named after a bishop named Arius who articulated it). Unlike Modalists, Arians stressed that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct individuals. But scholars have found it difficult to pin down *exactly* what the Arian position was, both because different Arians suggested slightly different formulations and because those they suggested are difficult to make sense of. Here, for example, is a portion of a creed (a statement of faith) formulated by a fourth century Arian named Ulfilas:

I believe in only one God the Father, the unbegotten and invisible, and in his only-begotten son, our Lord/Master and God, the designer and maker of all creation, having none other like him. Therefore, there is one God of all, who is also God of our God; and in one Holy Spirit, the illuminating and sanctifying power....not equal, but subject and obedient in all things to the Son. And I believe the Son to be subject and obedient in all things to God the Father. [Heather and Matthews. *Goths in the Fourth Century*. p. 143.]

This is a very confusing passage! Ulfilas begins by affirming the unity of God, whom he seems to identify exclusively with the Father. The Son is identified as God's only-begotten son – a uniquely perfect being by whom the world was made, but not equal to the Father and subject and obedient to the Father. Moreover, Arians understood the "begetting" of the Son to imply that there was a time before the Son existed, when the Father existed alone. The Spirit, in turn, is subject to the Son. Like other Arians, Ulfilas speaks of the Son as "our Lord", but then – and this is the puzzling part – adds "...and [our] God". The reason this is so puzzling is that this description comes within the same sentence in which Ulfilas has claimed that there is only one

God, the Father. The confusion continues in the next sentence, where he again affirms that there is *one* God (the Father) who is also “God of *our God*” (the Son).

It is difficult to interpret all of this so that it makes sense. Ulfilas might mean one of several things. It looks as though he first says that only the Father is God but then immediately contradicts himself by saying that the Son is also God. But it could be that the word ‘God’ is being used first as another name for the Father and then as a term for a *kind* of being which the Son also is. This would imply that there is more than one God, with different degrees of power and authority – a view familiar enough from the pagan religions, but an unlikely interpretation given that the creed begins by stressing that there is only one God. A third possibility is that the phrase “*our God*” means something different from the word “God” used alone – perhaps something like “the one we worship and obey”. But if this is what he means, he does not believe the Son to be God, but some other type of being intermediate between God and creation. This, at any rate, is the way Arianism is typically understood: that it is the Father who is truly called “God”, and that the Son is a uniquely perfect being begotten by the Father who in turn created the world. Perhaps part of what makes the passage confusing is simply a matter of unfortunate wording – the different uses of the word ‘God’ – but the basic commitments of the Arian view seem clear enough: the Son and the Spirit are beings that existed before the created world and are superior to it, but they are distinct from and inferior to the Father, whom they obey, and they came into being sometime before the creation of the world, as opposed to having *always* existed along with the Father.



Arianism was one of two alternatives debated in 325 CE at the Council of Nicea, which set out to codify Christian belief in what would come to be called the Nicene Creed. The other alternative was Trinitarianism. Trinitarians hold that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each God, and yet there is only one God. Trinitarianism attempts to reconcile the oneness of God with the distinctness of the Father, Son, and Spirit by making use of some terminology not found in the Bible but adopted from Greek philosophy: that God is one in “being” (Greek *ousia*, Latin *substantia*), but three in *persons* (Greek *prosopon*, Latin *persona*). The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct persons, but share a single being. God is thus a single *being*, but at the same time a community of *persons*. Biblical passages that distinguish Jesus from the Father and the Spirit are accommodated by saying that they are three distinct persons, and this helps to make sense of the interactions between them described in the Bible: for example, that Jesus prays to the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon believers. (John 14:16-17) The unity of God is preserved by saying that they share a single “being”. This idea of a single God who is three persons is referred to as the idea of the Trinity.

The Trinitarians approached the problem in the way that philosophers often solve puzzles: by making a distinction that aims at removing potential confusions. You go to a restaurant and have a three-course meal. Did you have one thing or three? Well, you had one *meal*, but three *courses*. If you count by meals you get one number, if you count by courses you get another, and there is no contradiction. Similarly, if you count the number of Gods (the number of beings) you get one, and if you count persons, you get three. Christian theologians have often employed similar

analogies to try to explain the Trinity. St. Patrick is reputed to have explained it to his Irish converts using the three-leafed shamrock: there are three leaves, but it is a single plant. Another popular analogy is with an egg: there is a single egg, but it is made up of a shell, a white, and a yolk.

But these analogies are problematic, because in the examples the three things are each *parts* of the one. Trinitarians do not believe that the Father, Son, and Spirit are each a *part* of God. Indeed, any such analogy is likely to be imperfect, because the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity is something special and unique. As a result, our ordinary understanding of things like shamrocks and eggs cannot supply a ready-made model for properly understanding the Trinity. We may first become aware of God in God's different persons – the transcendent Father, the Son who became flesh in Jesus, the Spirit who dwells in the believer – yet we also have a sense that their relationship is something far deeper and more intimate than that of three parts of a composite whole or than a relationship between human beings. They are each God, but together they are not simply a collection of different gods like the pagan pantheons, but are more integrally one. Just what this unity is like goes beyond what we can understand on the basis of the ways we understand other things, and in this sense the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery – something that we can to some extent grasp and appreciate, but which goes beyond what we can fully comprehend. The Trinitarian assertion that the three persons share a single “being” as one God is a way of putting this dimly-understood belief into words, but understanding the words is not enough

to give us a full comprehension of the claims about God we are making with those words.

The debate between the Arian and Trinitarian positions was one of the principal issues considered at the first Ecumenical Council at Nicea, and it was the Trinitarian camp that won out and became Christian orthodoxy, at least within the Roman Empire. (Arianism continued to be the prevailing form of Christianity among the Germanic tribes for another several centuries before dying out.) All of the surviving ancient strands of Christianity and the vast majority of Christian denominations today are Trinitarian, and most of the world's Christians are members of denominations that regard the Nicene Creed as a definitive statement of Christian belief. [creed if it is not produced elsewhere, note on revisions]

While Arianism was branded a heresy at Nicea, there is something distinctly different about the dispute between Arians and Trinitarians by comparison with earlier controversies involving sects like Gnosticism, Adoptionism, and Docetism. With those disputes, the issues could be more clearly understood without the need to resort to terminology drawn from ancient philosophy, and the stakes were far clearer. Among their adherents were people who believed such things as that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is in fact the devil, that Jesus did not really die on a cross, that Jesus was a man who was elevated to divinity because he followed the Law, that we are not in need of salvation through faith but better understanding, and that some people cannot be saved. Arianism, by contrast, was quite recognizably Christian. Arians accepted what I have described as the core commitments of Christian belief: in God, creation, sin, fallenness, salvation through

the death and resurrection of Christ, and sanctification through the Holy Spirit. The dispute between Arians and Trinitarians was not about core commitments, but about how these should be understood together intellectually as part of a system of doctrine. A Christian might well worry that someone who pursued Gnostic enlightenment would not be saved, because that person would not believe in or seek salvation through Christ's death and resurrection. But it would be hard to make a case that someone's salvation could depend on whether they accepted the right account of the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit. After all, the official orthodox formulation of that relationship, in terms of "being" and "persons", was not even proposed until the fourth century, and the terms of the dispute might well have puzzled even the apostles. Both Arianism and Trinitarianism were attempts to *work out an understanding* of core Christian commitments that they shared.

To my mind, what most recommends the doctrine of the Trinity is how it connects with the Biblical theme that God is love. Love is by definition relational – indeed, preeminently a relation between *persons* – but before the creation of the world, there was nothing for God to relate *to* unless there was already a plurality of divine persons. On the Trinitarian view, even before the creation of the world, the divine life was already a relationship of mutual love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the scope of this love was only expanded in the creation of beings worthy of love in their own right, which culminates in the adoption of saved human beings and their incorporation into the divine life.

### **Christ's Nature(s)**

The Council of Nicea definitively established Trinitarianism as Christian orthodoxy. But affirming Christ's divine nature brought back questions about his humanity. Human nature, after all, is something quite different from divine nature. So did Christ have just one (divine) nature, or did he have two (one human, one divine)? The fifth century saw several different answers to this question. One view, called Monophysitism (or more exactly, Apolinarianism), was that Jesus had had a real human body, but that the divine Logos had taken the place of the ordinary human mind. Unlike the Docetists, they believed that Jesus truly lived and died as a biological human being, but did not fully share our human nature because he did not have the kind of human minds we have but instead the divine Logos took its place. Another view, called Nestorianism, held that Christ had two separate natures – the divine Son and the human Jesus – in a single body. Their opponents, at least, took this to mean that Christ was, in effect, two *people* sharing a body. Monophysitism was condemned as heretical at the Council of Ephesus in 431, though more moderate descendants of it still exist in the Oriental Orthodox Churches of Egypt and east Africa. Nestorianism was in turn condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, though it remained the prevalent form of Christianity in Persia and spread eastward into places like India, China, and Mongolia, and variations upon it are still held by the Church of the East. What became the orthodox view within Roman Christianity was a view somewhere in-between: that Christ had two *natures* (human and divine), but that these were united into a single *person*.

I have glossed over here many details that a theologian or church historian would consider important. The development of technical uses of terms like “being”, “person”, and “nature” played an even larger role in the Monophysite and Nestorian controversies than in the Arian controversy, and the matter was further complicated by the differences in the technical vocabularies in Greek and in Latin. The reader who wishes to explore the issues further has a wealth of materials available on the Internet or at a local library. What I hope to make clear in this brief summary are two points. First, the *questions* that gave rise to the controversies are ones that arise quite naturally when one reflects on basic Christian commitments, and the positions that were debated more or less represent the possible answers. Second, debates about the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit and about the nature(s) of Christ are *intellectual* questions *within* the framework of the basic Christian commitments I have outlined in earlier chapters.

I thus see two very different stages in the development of Christian orthodoxy. The first and more important stage involved coming to an understanding of truly Christian views and how they were different from some of the alternatives that were offered in the ancient world. The second involved thinking through the implications of basic Christian commitments and trying to make them into a single coherent theological theory. What was at stake in the latter was not so much what a person had to do to be saved, but how best to *understand* God and God’s work of salvation through Christ. And in this history, we see people of sincere faith confronting a very natural series of questions about Christ and his relation to the Father and the Spirit: whether Christ was God; how Father, Son, and

Spirit can be distinct and yet be a single God; whether the incarnate Christ had a human as well as a divine nature. They are, indeed, the sorts of questions that I would expect someone who had taken half a semester of philosophy to come up with in thinking through the basic Christian commitments. If we think them through for ourselves, we can see the appeal and also the potential problems with each of the answers offered. And if it is still puzzling that someone would think that disagreements on these matters would justify divisions among Christians, we should remember that those who hold the surviving views – the descendants of Roman Christianity (Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox), the Oriental Orthodox, and the Churches of the East – are themselves troubled by their divisions, and seeking to reconcile them. Moreover, they all regard one another as Christians, even though each views the other as Christians with some heterodox beliefs, whereas they would likely view sects like the Marcionites as falling outside the bounds of Christianity altogether.

### **Sin, Free Will, and Predestination**

Thus far we have been discussing disputes on which Christians defined an orthodox position long ago. This does not mean that you will not find people today who believe one of the positions that lost out. The majority of Christians are not scholars, and have not learned very much Church history or doctrine. They may believe, say, that Jesus was God incarnate, but probably have not given much

thought to how to understand his relationship to the Father and the Spirit. In fact, in reading the previous section, you may have been surprised to find that your assumptions about such questions meant that you have been a Modalist or a Monophysite all along without even knowing it! This is certainly the experience of many seminarians and religion students when they take courses on the history of Christian doctrine. And this only helps to illustrate how natural it is for Christians to form different *interpretations* of their core commitments, and that sorting these out requires a good deal of intellectual work that goes beyond what is required for a life of faith. You may well find yourself motivated to look more deeply into why Christians of past ages ended up deciding that one position should be deemed the orthodox view, but you might equally decide that such questions are best left to the theologians and that the real work of the ordinary Christian is to know and love God better and to live a holy life.

The issues that will be discussed in the remainder of the chapter are different in that they are ones on which there are more widespread and ongoing differences today among Christians and between Christian denominations. The first concerns whether we have free will, or how much free will we have. This, of course, is a question that non-Christians are interested in as well – there is a great deal written on this topic by secular philosophers and theologians of other religions. It is particularly important for Christians because of the ways assumptions about free will (or the lack of it) relate to our understandings of sin and of God's grace. But our common sense assumptions about free will are not driven principally by theology, and so I shall begin with a more general discussion of the notion of freedom.



We tend to assume that we possess free will, in the sense that, before we act, there is more than one thing we *could* do, and the fact that we act in *this* way rather than in another way is a result of our own choice. Of course many of our everyday actions are performed more or less automatically, with no experience of deliberation or conscious decision. These were not done through conscious choice, but we often assume that these, too, were freely done in the sense that, had we paused to deliberate and think about other possibilities, we could easily have done something else instead. But not *everything* we do is a result of free choice. We breathe and our hearts beat because of autonomic processes over which we have little or no control, and if the doctor taps my knee with the hammer, my leg shoots out because of the patellar reflex whether I want it to or not. People suffer from addictions and compulsions that they cannot seem to conquer however much they might wish to do so, and I suggested in Chapter [5] that if we examine ourselves closely, we will all find some area of our lives where we have the “Romans 7 experience” of something – anger, bitterness, jealousy, resentment, insecurity – that we wish we could change but find ourselves powerless over.

The distinction between things that are done of our own free will and those that are not plays an important role in our ordinary moral thinking and in our legal system. A person is not held responsible for her actions, or at least not to the same degree, if she acted under compulsion or coercion, was temporarily insane, or acting under post-hypnotic suggestion. We generally blame people and hold them guilty for their actions only when they could have done otherwise. If I kick the doctor because I do not like the bill for my checkup, I am guilty of assaulting him. But if he

taps my knee with the little hammer and my leg shoots out and kicks him, that is not assault, it is just the patellar reflex, and that is not under my control. I may feel bad about the pain it caused, but I should not feel *guilty*, because I did not *do* anything wrong. Many philosophers have held that *moral* evaluation of an action does not even make sense unless we assume that the action was done freely. The philosopher Immanuel Kant summed up this intuition in saying that “ought implies can”. If I did something that was wrong and I could have done otherwise, it makes sense to blame me, but not if I was unable to do otherwise, because I cannot have a moral duty to do the impossible. Likewise, if I failed to do something that I could and should have done, it makes sense to blame me for not doing it, but it makes no sense to blame me for failing to do something it was impossible for me to do. Not all philosophers agree with Kant here, but many see his analysis as a straightforward consequence of the very notions of moral obligation, guilt, and merit. Kant himself in fact went so far as to regard this as an important reason to believe that we have free will: moral evaluations make sense, and they can make sense only if we assume that we possess free will, and so we must conclude that there really is free will.

Many Christian theologians have likewise held that the notion of free will is importantly tied to an understanding of *sin*. If a person *deserves* punishment for his sins, they must be things he was morally responsible for, things he did *freely*. The idea of God punishing people for things they could not help doing has struck many as downright unjust. Indeed, one might well worry that, since God made us, any bad things that we do as consequences of our *natures* as opposed to our *choices* are God’s fault and not ours, and this seems in conflict with the Christian assumption

that God is perfectly good. Without a notion of free will, we would end up with something like the idea (which we have seen in the Manichees and some of the Gnostics) that some portion of the universe – including some portion of our own nature, or the natures of those who are children of darkness – is *intrinsically* evil, and this is deeply incompatible with the Christian understanding of God and creation.

The idea of free will can also deepen a Christian's understanding of what makes human beings different from most other created things. God *could* have made a world containing only things without free will, like rocks and trees and frogs. This would have been a world without sin, because rocks and trees and frogs lack free will. They simply do what they do. If a frog eats a fly, it has harmed the fly, but the frog has committed no sin. Perhaps God could also have made beings that looked and acted much like people, but were really well-behaved robots, programmed never to do things like lie or steal or commit adultery. They would never transgress the Law, but this would not be because they freely chose the good, but because they were constrained to do whatever they were programmed to do. Such "righteous robots" might seem admirable, but if God had made them in place of human beings like you and me, there would be something noble missing from the world. For there is something particularly noble about the capacity to *freely choose* the good out of love or simply *because* one recognizes it to be good, and this is something that the robots would lack. But to give some of his creatures the ability to freely choose the good, God had to make them in such a way that they could choose *not* to do it as well – otherwise it would not really be a free choice. And so, to

the minds of many Christian thinkers, the existence of creatures with free will is something that makes God's creation better – more noble – than it could have been if it had lacked such creatures. Just as the very existence of created things introduced a kind of intrinsic value to the world, the existence of *free* creatures added an additional dimension of value to the world because it provided the possibility of moral goodness, even though it also made moral evil possible.

A literary example might help to explore this intuition. Years ago, I saw a movie called *The Stepford Wives* – an eerie story about a family that moves to a seemingly perfect suburban neighborhood where, we eventually find out, all of the wives have been replaced by robots who are programmed to behave in all the ways that were presented as ideal in TV shows of the 1950s and 60s. They were always kind, friendly, well dressed, faithful, and had dinner ready when their husbands got home from work. The crux of the plot is that the husband who has moved into the neighborhood gradually becomes aware of the situation and is pressured by his neighbors to let the local mad scientist replace his wife with a robotic copy. Of course, this would involve doing away with his wife in the process, a prospect at which he is understandably horrified. But we can adjust the story to avoid that moral complication (as well as the sexism of the whole premise) by asking how we would feel about the prospect of moving into a neighborhood in which *everyone* else had been “Stepfordized” – a community of incredibly nice robots. If you have truly bad neighbors, there might be some appeal to this idea – if nothing else, there would be a lot less conflict around you and life might go more smoothly. But, in spite of this, I find the idea appalling rather than appealing. Even setting aside the

creepiness of it, I would feel that such an existence would be missing something deeply important. It is not clear that there could be real love or even real friendship there. However nice the Stepford neighbors might be, it would not be because they loved or cared about me. Likewise, to the extent that I thought of them as machines, it might be very hard for me to love them or to care how I treated them. And what if we adjusted the premise a bit further – so that *I* could be “Stepfordized” in a more modest fashion that would preserve my consciousness, but deprive me of free choice, so that I was in effect watching myself do the things that a control chip made me say and do? They would all be very *nice* and *respectable* things, but in spite of that, they would have no real moral worth, because *I* would not really have done them. If I did not sin after being Stepfordized, it would not be because I had risen above sin, but because I had fallen below the level of beings who can do good or evil.

So there are a number of reasons that many Christian thinkers have considered free will to be an important part of a full Christian picture of the world. The idea of sin and the presence of evil in the world seem to make sense only as a result of God having endowed us with the power to freely choose between good and evil, and sometimes we choose evil. The ability to freely choose the good makes us something more than mere robots and elevates us above the animals, but it also brings with it the possibility of freely choosing evil, and when we do so, there is no one to blame but ourselves, however much we might want to say “the serpent beguiled me and I ate.”

But the notion that human nature is fallen complicates this. Perhaps Adam and Eve were once fully free to choose only what is good, but we find that we are not.

Many of our actions are the results of sinful desires, attachments, and compulsions that arise from our fallen nature. Our nature as we find it is no longer what we might suppose that God originally created it to be. As a result, we find ourselves to be “slaves to sin” (John 8:34, Romans 6:20). In Chapter [5] I presented this in experiential terms as the “bad news” that precedes the Good News of salvation. But we are now in a position to see that there are further questions to be asked. How far does this “moral bondage” extend? Am I really not free *at all*, or perhaps free only to choose among bad things? Or am I still able to choose *some* good things, though not others? And with respect to the things I do under the bondage of sin, if I am not free to choose otherwise, does this make them something like the patellar reflex when the doctor taps me on the knee – things that may cause harm, but for which I am not really morally responsible? What about the fallenness of my own nature – am I to blame for that as well? Perhaps some of my vices developed out of my own past choices, and so I bear some responsibility for those. But is my fallenness completely a consequence of my own personal history, or was I somehow born into this condition?

Let us begin with the last question first. I have mentioned earlier that the word ‘sin’ has two meanings. On the one hand, it can refer to individual *acts*: if I steal, I have committed a sin, and if I then lie about it, I have committed a second sin. On the other hand, it can refer to an *inner condition*, which we might distinguish by calling it *sinfulness*. In one sense, sinning makes us sinful, but in another sense, our sins may stem from a pre-existing condition of sinfulness: I stole because I am a covetous person who does not respect the property rights of others, I lied because I

wish to present a false face to cover my misdeeds. Certainly the relationship between sins and sinfulness can work in both directions: doing wrong can erode my character so that I become the kind of person whose habits and desires are more sinful, and those habits and desires are in turn what drive me to sin. But was there ever a time when I was not sinful? When I was born, I had not committed any sins. Was I an innocent then, with no trace of sinfulness within me, or was I born in the inner condition of sinfulness, the way one might be born with a congenital disease?

Orthodox Christian teaching on this is that Adam and Eve were not created in a state of sinfulness. Their state became fallen and sinful only after they had sinned in the Garden. But their descendants – you and me and the rest of humanity – came into existence in a fallen and sinful state. The sins of Adam and Eve did not just affect them as individual human beings, they affected *humanity*. What I have described as the “fallenness” of humanity is thus often referred to as the consequence of “original sin”, the idea being that our natures are fallen, from our very conception, as a result of the first sin of our ancestors. The Bible does not provide a *theory* of how this works, but many Christian thinkers have supposed that our fallen condition is, in modern terms, something like a *heritable trait*, perhaps passed along biologically or perhaps affecting the soul directly.

In previous chapters, I deliberately avoided the language of “original sin”, “ancestral sin” or “inherited sin” in favor of “fallenness”. In part, this was because I wished to focus on the *experience* of corrupt elements of our nature that are not in our control and were not a consequence of our own choice, and for that purpose, theories about *why* we are in that condition would have been a distraction. But it

was also in part because I am in general wary of theological theories that go beyond what can be directly substantiated from the Bible. Speculations about whether the fall involved, say, a genetic change might make for interesting science fiction, but the real heart of the doctrine is that our situation is more complicated than having committed individual sins that require forgiveness – it requires a transformation of our inner being through sanctification.

One important implication most Christians have drawn from this doctrine, however, is that it makes sense to baptize infants. They may not have committed any sins that are in need of forgiveness, but the purpose of baptism is not simply the forgiveness of particular sins, but entry into a new life in Christ in which the Holy Spirit enters us and begins to transform our nature. But the idea of being born with a sinful, fallen nature also raises questions about free will and moral responsibility. If we each fell individually because of our free choices, we would bear total responsibility for our condition and the subsequent actions that arose from it. But if our sinfulness is something we are born into, we were not responsible for being this way, and any actions that we are compelled to do as a result would seem not to be free actions, because we cannot choose the good. And if only free actions can be morally blameworthy, it seems to make no sense to blame us for those actions that are a result of being slaves to our sinful natures. Something like a congenital moral illness calls for a cure, not for punishment. If there is *blame* to be assigned, it would seem that the blame for our sins rests upon Adam and Eve. (And note that to go down this road bears an eerie resemblance to the blame-shifting we find in Genesis 3, where Adam tried to blame his transgression on Eve, and Eve upon the serpent.)



There are, however, two ways of mitigating this conclusion. First, our *experience* of fallenness comes in the recognition of *specific things* we are unable to change in ourselves. It is not an experience of, say, *never* being able to control our actions or make good choices. Of course, our experience might be misleading – things that seem to be good choices, freely made, might turn out to not really be free or fully good. But there is at least a question to be asked about *how much* of our nature has been corrupted by the fall. On the one hand, it might be that each of us retains the freedom to choose the good in some areas of our lives, but not in others. Some of our free choices are not good, and for those we are morally blameworthy. But there is also the possibility that our nature is so totally corrupted that nothing that we do in our fallen state is truly good. We might perform what seem like good actions, but even those might be tainted with the wrong motives. If I give money to the poor or perform kind acts, but do so out of a desire to be admired by others, my actions are not morally pure. The idea that our natures are completely corrupted by the fall is often called the “total depravity” of the will, a view that is one of the cornerstones of some forms of Christianity, such as Calvinism.

The idea of total depravity, moreover, is compatible with two views about freedom. One is the possibility that, in the fall, freedom was completely lost so that our actions are not really freely chosen at all. The other is that we still retain freedom – in the sense of being able to choose to do what we *want* – but that our motivations are corrupted in ways that make us unable to want to do the good. We are, as it were, *willing* slaves of sin, doing evil because that is what we want. And because our sins are done willingly, we are morally responsible for them.

Of course, these are alternative theories about the nature of the “bad news”. Either way, we are in need of salvation and sanctification. But there is a further problem here, precisely about how salvation is possible. Salvation is offered as a free gift – “free” in the sense that it is offered without price, and cannot be earned. But like any other gift, it must be received. And if our fallen condition leaves us unable to choose the good, it must leave us unable to choose this greatest of goods as well, even though it is offered without price! Not only are we unable to be righteous or earn our salvation, we should not be free even to accept it. We thus need God’s grace, not only in the *offering* of salvation, but also in order to enable us to *receive* it.

There are two principal views Christians have taken about this. One (which is called Arminianism, after a theologian named Arminius who articulated it) is that, when a person is brought to the brink of accepting the Good News, God bestows a special kind of grace, “prevenient grace” (meaning “that which comes before”), which gives her the freedom to accept or reject the Good News, but does not itself transform her character. The latter is the work of “transforming grace”, which comes only after she has received the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit. Arminianism is the predominant view in the Methodist tradition and its descendants – Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists – as well as the Churches of Christ and some Baptists. The other view, held by Lutherans and Calvinists, is *predestination*. This is the view that it is *only* God’s grace that determines who will be saved and who will not – it is not a result of a person’s free choice. Indeed, not only is a person unable to *choose* to receive this grace, she is also unable to *resist* it.

But if some people are saved and others are not, this means that God predestined some people to be saved and others to be damned.

Indeed, to some advocates of predestination, this seems to be a view that we need to take in any case for other reasons as well. Christians regard God as sovereign and all-powerful. God is *omnipotent*, in the sense that there is nothing God cannot do. But human free will seems, on the face of it, to be incompatible with God's omnipotence. If my choice is truly free, God does not control it. God may be able to make me drive to the market by *compelling* me in some fashion, but it seems self-contradictory to say that even God can compel me to *freely* go to the market, because the very notion of doing something *freely* implies that it was not done under compulsion. So if there is free will, there are things that God cannot do. But Christian philosophers who believe in free will have argued that this reasoning is confused. First, human beings have free will only to the extent that God grants it. God cannot make me do something freely, but he can prevent me from doing something freely by suspending my freedom. If he chooses to allow me to use my free will, it is not because my freedom is something that exists independently of God's power and places limits upon it, it is because of God's own choice. He does not choose *what* I shall freely do, but chooses whether to allow me freedom. Second, the reason that God cannot make me freely do something is that *making* someone do something *freely* would be self-contradictory, like making 2+2 equal 7 or making a triangle with only two sides. When Christians say that God is omnipotent, they do

not usually mean that he can do things that are self-contradictory, like making a two-sided triangle or compelling a free action.<sup>4</sup>

Predestination is a controversial idea among Christians. To its proponents, it seems a necessary consequence of the sovereignty of God and the corruption of human nature. Opponents of predestination think that it is perfectly consistent to say that God is omnipotent but also grants us freedom, and are horrified at the idea that God chooses to bestow salvation on some while withholding it from others. If all are born in slavery to sin, and the only difference between those who are saved and those who are damned is that God chose to save some and damn others, this seems to make God cruel and arbitrary, and this seems totally at odds with the Christian belief that God is loving and good. To this, predestinarians reply by distinguishing two aspects of God's goodness: justice and mercy. They argue that, when God punishes sinners, he is acting out of justice, which is good, and when he saves sinners, he is acting out of mercy, which is also good. Mercy is the suspension of justly deserved punishment, so with respect to each individual case, there is a choice between justice and mercy. You cannot have both at once. Yet if the choice of justice or mercy is entirely up to God, one might well think that a loving God would always choose mercy, and so, the opponent of predestination concludes, the question of whether a person accepts or rejects salvation must ultimately be a matter of her own free choice, even if the ability to make this free choice requires

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<sup>4</sup> There have been a few Christian thinkers, like René Descartes, who have thought that God's omnipotence implies that he could even change the laws of mathematics, but this is an uncommon view.

God to restore a certain measure of freedom to fallen men and women through prevenient grace.

Free will and its relationship to God, sin, and salvation turns out to be a complicated topic that goes beyond the basic commitments of the faith. Christians believe that everyone has sinned and is in need of forgiveness for the sins they have committed. Most Christians have also taken the view that human nature as we find it is fallen to an extent that we cannot, by our own wills, keep ourselves from sinning entirely. Some believe that we are so corrupted that we cannot even will anything entirely good, others that it is more of a mixed bag: there might be some good things that we can will and do, others that we can will but cannot consistently get ourselves to do, and still others in which we are truly slaves to sin. Either way, we need more than forgiveness, we need a transformation of our natures through God's grace. On this much, advocates of free will and predestination agree. Where they differ is in the theories they give about how it works.

But there was also another view of free will that arose in the fifth century, advanced by a monk named Pelagius and hence known as Pelagianism. Pelagius rejected the doctrine of the fall and original sin, holding that Adam's sin affected only Adam, and that each of us is affected by and accountable only for our own sins. Moreover, he held that we are each capable of resisting sin and being righteous through our own wills. (He believed that God *does* assist us with his grace, but that we are in principle capable of being righteous without this aid.) This might sound like a kind of works-righteousness without any need for salvation, but Pelagius did believe that we have all committed sins, and that these need to be forgiven through

salvation in Christ. What he rejected was the further idea that this also brings with it a transformation of a fallen nature through sanctification. Pelagianism was condemned as a heresy because it was perceived as denying the need for salvation (which it did not) and sanctification (which it did). But it is a view that has reappeared in some form in every subsequent generation.

## **Life After Death**

Christians believe that we continue to exist after our bodily death. This much is clearly attested throughout the New Testament. It is natural to wonder what this existence will be like; but about this the Bible supplies little information, and what it says is a bit confusing. There are two ways the Bible speaks of the afterlife, and at least on the surface they seem different from one another. The first is the idea of a bodily resurrection. When Jesus was raised from the dead, the Bible makes it clear that he was not a ghost or spirit, but a person of flesh and blood. When Thomas doubted the reality of his resurrection, Jesus invited Thomas to touch him (John 20:27), and on several occasions the risen Christ ate and drank. The Bible likewise speaks of a future resurrection of believers in bodies that will no longer be subject to death and are in some sense “glorified”. In his letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul emphasizes the importance of the connection between Jesus’ resurrection and the resurrection of believers:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has

not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. [1 Cor 15:12-18]

Paul goes on to say that this will happen when Jesus returns (1 Cor 15:23), and then says, in somewhat cryptic terms, how resurrected bodies will be different from those we inhabit now:

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. [1 Cor 15:42-53]

Perhaps the most important difference is that resurrection bodies are no longer subject to death. But we are left to wonder what is meant by a “spiritual body” and how it is different from a “physical body”, or what it is to be “raised in glory and power”, or to “bear the image of the man of heaven”. The Book of Revelation, moreover, says that when Christ returns he will bring about a “new Heaven and a new Earth” (Rev 21:1), and it is presumably on this new Earth that those resurrected in Christ will live forever under his rule.

But there are also passages in the Bible that suggest that the dead exist in places or conditions that seem distinct from the Earth: Heaven and Hell. In the

vision John recounts in Revelation, he sees saints and martyrs in God's throneroom in heaven (Rev 6:10). And several passages speak of Hell as a place of everlasting torment. (E.g., Matt 8:12, 13:42, Luke 16:23-24) Heaven and Hell are described in terms that suggest they are *places* – even if they may not be places within the universe we see and study through science or which we could reach by travelling far enough in one direction or another. And presumably the saints that John saw in his vision appeared in a bodily form – there is nowhere in the Bible a suggestion that we exist after death as amorphous disembodied spirits.

Of course, it is possible that all of this is in language that is accommodated to our earthly understanding: in order to get across the idea that those who are saved dwell in bliss in the presence of God, or that those who are not saved continue to exist in torment in their separation from God, it might be necessary to depict it in terms we can already understand, like standing in a room before God's throne or burning in a pit of fire. Perhaps the very nature of a vision as a *vision* required that John experience the saints and martyrs, and even God, in visual terms he could recognize, or perhaps he had to resort to such language to try to convey something ineffable to his readers. Certainly John's first letter suggests that we do not really know what we will be like when Jesus returns. (1 John 3:2) And perhaps the two descriptions – a bodily resurrection on a remade Earth, and existence in Heaven or Hell – are alternative ways of trying to express, in terms we can understand now (however imperfectly), things that are presently beyond or hidden from our knowledge. We can have faith that we will survive the death of our bodies, and that if we are saved we will dwell with God in bodies that are no longer subject to death



or infirmity. Perhaps that is all that we need to know, and it is pointless to try to figure it out further. However, many Christians *have* tried to figure it out further. Many Protestants insist that the bodily resurrection is what the Bible really tells us to expect. Catholics, by contrast, believe in Heaven and Hell. Some, both Catholic and Protestant, have tried to combine the two accounts into a single larger story.

A related question on which Christians have disagreed is just *when* this all happens. The problem is clearest with the idea that the dead will be raised when Christ returns. What happens between the moments of a person's death and Christ's return? I may trust that the saints of past ages will be raised some day in the future, but where are they now? Do they have some kind of conscious existence in-between? In two of Paul's letters, he speaks in passing of those who "sleep in Christ," (1 Cor 15:18, 1 Thess 4:14) and some Christians have taken this to mean that, between death and the resurrection, there is no conscious existence – being resurrected will be like waking up from a long sleep in a glorified body. Those who believe in Heaven and Hell, by contrast, tend to think that some of the dead are already in Heaven and others in Hell. And there are some who have put together more complicated ideas – such as that the dead in Christ presently dwell in Heaven (or in a separate place called Paradise) until Jesus returns and prepares a new Earth. These are all natural ways of projecting what seem like the right inferences to draw from one or both of the Biblical ways of talking about what happens after death.

But in this case, the differences between them also have an important further implication: if the departed saints now dwell in the presence of God, and if – as seems to be suggested by the few visions reported in the Bible that speak to the

matter – one of their primary occupations is prayer, it stands to reason that they are in a position to pray *for us* and for the world. Some Christians take great comfort in this idea and even believe that they have patron saints who watch over them in prayer, and whose prayers they solicit. Other Christians object to this idea – whether because they believe the departed saints are still “sleeping” in Christ and hence cannot pray for anyone, or because they view the practice of invoking the prayers of the saints as bordering on idolatry or conjuring the spirits of the dead.

Questions about the afterlife also have an important intersection with questions about sanctification. Both the resurrection and Heaven seem to be presented as states in which a person has been completely freed from sin. Perhaps some individuals are fully sanctified in this life, but probably most Christians die with unrepented sins and still bearing some traces of their fallen nature. How do they get from this still-imperfect state to the holiness Christians impute to those in Heaven or the resurrection of the blessed? It is possible, of course, that it happens miraculously and in an instant – that just as some people experience sudden and dramatic *partial* transformations of their moral nature in this life, God will bring about a *complete* transformation at the moment of our death or resurrection. The other possibility is that there is still a need for some further process of cleansing – a *purging* of the soul of its residual attachments to sin. By the eleventh century, the western church had begun to teach that, in addition to Heaven and Hell, there is a third place, called Purgatory, set aside for this purpose. Eastern Orthodox Christians also believe that there is a process through which the dead are *purified* (more a matter of *sanctification*), but the Catholic idea of Purgatory was understood

additionally in terms of *punishment for sins* in fire and torment. The most vivid and dramatic literary portrayal of the medieval western notions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven is found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. (It is a "comedy" in the older literary sense of a story with a happy ending – the Christian soul reaching Heaven – and not in the contemporary sense of a funny story.) In Dante's poem, he is led through a kind of tour of the three realms, descending into Hell and witnessing the torments of the damned before ascending through Purgatory to Heaven. There is a marked change in the transition from Hell to Purgatory. Souls in Hell are without hope and cut off from God. Souls in Purgatory, however, are on the road to Heaven, and view the pains they endure as something to be gladly embraced, like a painful medical cure.

While the Bible mentions Heaven and Hell, the idea of Purgatory must be regarded as a product of human conjecture. This is not to say that the conjecture is true or that it is false, but merely that it is a conclusion arrived at through a process of reasoning: to enter Heaven, a person must be cleansed of all sin, but many Christians die without all of their sins repented of or removed, so it stands to reason that there must be some process through which sins can be repented and attachments to sin broken between dying and entering Heaven. It is not the only possible view. Many Protestants would hold that Christ's death already provides forgiveness for all sins, and that no special act of repentance or penance for particular sins is required of a person, but only to accept the free gift, and that God can miraculously transform our natures in an instant.

## Sources of Authority

How do, and how *should*, Christians go about settling the questions about which they are unsure, or on which they disagree? This is itself one of the questions on which Christians disagree – in a way, perhaps the most fundamental of them. There are four main sources authority that Christians rely on to varying extents: scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. But the ways that Christians balance the four, and what they do when there seems to be a tension between what they suggest, are diverse.

Historically, most Christians have given scripture pride of place among the four, because they regard scripture as the inspired word of God. There are many things that Christians believe chiefly because they find it in the Bible. For example, there is little reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead or that he will return and bring the dead back to life except the testimony of scripture. But there are also matters on which the Bible seems to say different things in different places – for example, on the question of whether those who are saved go to heaven or sleep until their bodies are resurrected on a new Earth. This is the kind of situation that has prompted Christians in every generation to use reason to try to sort the matter out and find a way of reconciling what appear to be conflicting texts, and some denominations have their own doctrinal traditions that favor one answer or another. Catholic doctrine, for example, holds that the dead go to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, while some Protestant denominations hold that the dead await a bodily resurrection. There are also other situations that lead Christians to reason through what they find

in Scripture: when Biblical texts do not give fully clear answers to questions that arise (such as the relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit), or about how a passage should best be interpreted. Fundamentalism, for example, is characterized by a literal interpretation of the plain sense of the text, and so fundamentalists read Genesis as implying that the universe was created in a period of six days about six thousand years ago. (The six days are those spoken of in Genesis 1, the age of the world is calculated on the basis of the genealogies.) But there is also a long tradition of Christian thinkers making a distinction between the literal and the spiritual meaning of texts. One of the great western theologians, Augustine of Hippo, wrote around 415 that we should always look for the spiritual meaning of Biblical texts, but that the literal meaning is not always operative, and suggested (long before there was scientific evidence that the world is billions of years old) that a Christian need not take Genesis 1 to present an accurate literal account of how God created the world, or over what span of time. In order to properly interpret a text, we need to determine what kind of text it is supposed to be.

But the age of the universe also provides a good example of a case in which an interpretation of scripture can conflict with what natural reason (in this case, in the form of modern scientific cosmology) tells us. (By “*natural* reason”, I mean the conclusions we reach on the basis of careful inquiry that is not based on what God has revealed, such as the conclusions of modern science. We also use reason in sorting out theological claims based in Biblical revelation, so natural reason is a subset of reasoning.) *If* someone thinks that Genesis implies that the universe is only six thousand years old, and the scientists say that it is more like thirteen billion

years old, there appears to be a conflict. And there are two basic ways to resolve such a conflict. One is to hold that one type of authority trumps the other – either that scripture trumps natural reason or that natural reason trumps scripture. The other is to find a way to dissolve the conflict, either by showing that we do not need to interpret scripture in the way that seems to conflict with reason, or by showing that *the interpretation we have been using of* what reason (including science) tells us is not really the best interpretation. Augustine’s commentary on the literal meaning of Genesis is an example of dissolving an apparent conflict by showing that the interpretation of scripture that gave rise to it is mistaken, or at least not obligatory. It can also work the other way around: in some of my professional work, I have tried to show that other apparent conflicts are a result of bad interpretations of what the sciences really tell us. (For example, that a proper understanding of scientific laws gives us no reason to doubt the existence of free will or miracles.) [] But there are also cases when a person’s best understanding of scripture conflicts with her best understanding of what natural reason suggests. And it is here that I think we find the core meaning of the notions of theological “liberalism” and “conservatism”. A liberal, in the theological sense, is someone who, when her best understanding of scripture conflicts with her best understanding of what natural reason teaches, sides with natural reason. A conservative is someone who sides with scripture. Of course, it is also possible to simply live with such paradoxical conflict, and indeed this might sometimes be prudent, as our best understandings of either scripture or reason may be mistaken. In our age, we see extremes of both liberalism and conservatism, as well as many shades in between. Over the past two centuries,

there have been liberal theologians who have rejected all of the miraculous and supernatural stories in the Bible as incompatible with science, to a point that it is hard to see how the views they are left with are recognizably Christian at all. Fundamentalism developed around the beginning of the twentieth century as a backlash against this extreme liberalism by adopting a skepticism towards scientific claims and insisting on a plain literal reading of scripture.

While each Christian comes to theological questions anew for himself or herself, few of them are truly new. Some, as we have seen, were debated long ago, and on some of these the prevailing views of past centuries were made into official orthodoxy. Many Christians hold a great respect for the conclusions reached by Church councils and the great theologians of the past, and these are what is meant by “tradition”. Some denominations – most conspicuously, Catholicism – have defined official doctrine on a great many additional questions. The Eastern Orthodox take a more indirect approach: we should believe the things that the great fathers of the Church agreed upon, but these do not need to all be spelled out in official statements of doctrine. Some Protestants have defined their own doctrines, while others refuse to define collective doctrine at all. Anglicans take a middle road, accepting more or less what is in the Nicene Creed as doctrine, but allowing individuals to have their own opinions on everything else that is not plainly inconsistent with scripture.

The Reformation was in no small measure about how to balance the authority of scripture and reason on the one hand and tradition on the other. Catholics and Protestants both recognized the authority and central importance of

scripture. Where they differed was on the question of who gets to interpret scripture. Catholics held that their official proclamations of doctrine were definitive, and that believers were obliged to accept them. Protestants thought some of this traditional doctrine was in error, and that it could and should be held accountable to further rational scrutiny by theologians and even ordinary believers by reading and thinking through scripture for themselves and debating it with one another. One of the reasons that such conflicts are so difficult to resolve is that the parties are not, as it were, playing by the same rules. If you think that the Pope and Church councils have a monopoly on the interpretation of scripture, you are likely to argue your views based on tradition and authority. But someone who does not accept the premise that Popes and councils have any special authority to interpret the faith for the rest of us are unlikely to be moved by such arguments. Likewise, when liberals argue that Jesus could not have risen from the dead because we know that the dead always stay dead, conservatives reject the basic assumption on which the argument is based. It is thus difficult for Christians who take different views about the relationship between the different sources of authority to get very far in talking to one another about theology.

The fourth source of authority, which I have called “experience”, really encompasses two very different things. The first is ordinary life experience – the things that come along, sometimes unexpectedly, and influence what we believe. The apostles did not expect gentiles to become Christians, and when it happened, they had to rethink some of their assumptions. The first Christians might have expected that those who were baptized would never sin again, but people did sin



again, and so they had to figure out what to do about that. Those who assumed that Jesus would return before the apostles died off had to do some rethinking. The other sort of “experience” is specifically *religious* experience, ranging from a peaceful conviction that comes after much prayer and discernment, to things like visions and prophecy. Even in the New Testament, Christians are warned to *test* any visions, prophecies, or angelic apparitions they might experience. (1 John 4:1) Subsequent generations of Christians have generally held that any such experiences that are in contradiction to scripture cannot be from God. (As a result, most Christians regard sects like the Mormons, who claim to have received a further revelation that supersedes the Bible, as heretical or even non-Christian.) Some Christians, particularly Pentecostals, nonetheless expect that such experiences will be a normal part of a Christian life. (Though they must be tested, as there are false prophecies, and the devil can appear as an angel from God.) At the other extreme, some Protestants believe that such “gifts of the Spirit” [1 Corinthians 12] ended with the age of the apostles. Catholics tend to see them as things that we find in the lives of great saints, but which are unlikely to occur in the life of an ordinary believer.

Like the other sources of authority, experience and the conclusions we draw from it are fallible. What seems like a clear lesson from life experience might actually be the conventional wisdom of the world. Someone who hears a voice or sees a vision might be firmly convinced that it is a message from God yet be mistaken, as is evidenced by many sects and cults that have believed such things as that Jesus would return on a certain date on the basis of an experience their leader had. But the same holds true for the other sources of authority. There are

conflicting interpretations of many passages of the Bible, and some of them must be mistaken, and likewise when different denominations have conflicting doctrines.

What is accepted as scientific truth in one century is often rejected in the next.

This isn't really anything special about *religious* belief – what we thought we understood as children was gradually replaced with more adequate and sophisticated understanding through our own experience, what we were taught and believed on the authority of teachers and textbooks, and what we thought through more carefully for ourselves; and if we think we understand everything perfectly now, we deceive ourselves. And the same is true for the understanding human beings have acquired collectively – it is continually growing and changing whenever we discover new things to consider, and often is worked out through debating the merits of alternative views. Adding scripture to the picture expands the sources of evidence, as Christians believe that God has revealed things that our minds could not discover on their own. But it does not provide a magic elevator to perfect understanding. What God reveals is often difficult for our minds to understand, and contrary to our ordinary ways of thinking about things. We can accept it through faith without perfect understanding – and this is enough for salvation and a faithful Christian life – but when faith is in search of understanding, it is difficult work and our understanding is always imperfect in this life. As Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth,

For we know only in part...but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor 13:9-12)

**[12]****One Church, Thirty Thousand Denominations, Two Billion Christians**

It is instructive to look at an historical timeline of the emergence of different Christian denominations. [chart somewhere here] This chart cannot, of course, show all of the denominations that exist today, as those number in the tens of thousands. And what the lines on the charts really show are not exactly denominations at all, but what we might call *traditions*, some of which embrace a number of denominations. We will have to discuss what that means, but to take a simple example, “Anglicanism” is a tradition that began when the Church of England split off from Roman Catholicism, but it now contains distinct self-governing denominations in nations that were once British colonies, such as the Episcopal Church in the United States.

There are, however, several things that stand out from this chart. There are really three periods at which divisions in the Church took place. The first was in the fourth and fifth centuries, in a period during which the Church undertook the

codification of the faith in a series of ecumenical councils. When we in the west think of Christianity today, we tend to think only of Christianity as it existed in the Roman Empire and its descendants today: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. But from early times Christianity also spread into other parts of the world: Africa, the Germanic tribes of northern Europe, the Middle East, and into Asia. These developed slightly different theological traditions from Roman Christianity, some of which still exist in the Oriental Orthodox Churches of east Africa and the Churches of the East found from Syria to India. The descendants of Roman Christianity themselves split in the eleventh century into what have come to be called Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, more or less along lines reflecting the division of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. And the Christianity of western Europe underwent a massive explosion of diversity beginning in the sixteenth century, known as the Protestant Reformation. The vast majority of the denominations that exist today are Protestant (though Catholicism is by far the largest denomination in terms of membership). So one of the questions we will need to come back to is why the Reformation led to an ever-increasing number of Protestant denominations. Indeed, before the Reformation, it would probably not be exactly correct to call the different branches of Christianity “denominations”. They were more on the order of Christianity as it was practiced in different parts of the world.

The larger question to be examined is how Christianity came to be a religion in which there are so many different self-governing denominations. I said previously that this would have come as a surprise to Christians in New Testament

times and even in the Middle Ages. So it is worth taking some time to begin by discussing the early Church and what we know of how it was organized, and then proceed to brief discussions of the major changes that led to the Christian churches dating from the early centuries before a slightly longer discussion of the Reformation and how it led to a proliferation of Christian denominations.

### **First-Century Christian Communities**

Our knowledge of how Christians lived and gathered in the first century is rather limited, and much of what we know of it comes from the Book of Acts and other books of the New Testament. At first, after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the Church consisted of only a few dozen people who had personally known Jesus. Acts 1:15 tells us that one hundred and twenty of them were gathered together in the upper room fifty days after his resurrection, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled this small group of disciples so that they began to tell others about salvation in Christ. Acts reports that that several thousand people who were visiting Jerusalem for the festival heard the disciples on that day and "were added to their number". But "added to their number" does not mean "joined the community of disciples in Jerusalem." Those who accepted Christ that day are described as people who were on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast, and were Jews who lived in other countries – in modern terms, places such as Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Libya – to which they presumably returned shortly thereafter, though the Bible

tells us nothing about what became of them, such as whether they established Christian communities in their native lands or whether they ever communicated again with the apostles. But we are told something about the early community of Christians in Jerusalem, such as that they “shared all things in common”, with many selling their property and bringing their wealth to the apostles for distribution to those who had need. (Acts 2:44, 4:32-35) Occasionally, Christian groups have tried to re-establish this communal form of life, but most scholars agree that it was practiced only for a short time (years or perhaps decades) in the early Church.

Following the instructions to preach the Good News, the apostles began to travel outside Jerusalem, and indeed outside Jewish territory, to do so. Certainly Paul travelled as far as Turkey, Greece, and Rome, leaving small communities of new Christians in most of the places he visited. Peter became the leader of Christian communities first in Antioch (Syria) and later in Rome, and John in Ephesus (near present-day Istanbul) before being sent into exile on the Greek island of Patmos. Our information about the other disciples is less clear, but there are at least legends (of varying degrees of credibility) to the effect that they brought the gospel to such far-flung places as north Africa, Persia, Armenia, the west coast of India, and perhaps even to places like Russia and Scotland. As they did this, they left behind Christian communities, several of which are mentioned in the New Testament. So what we find in the early decades of the Church is a small group of apostles who had known Jesus spreading his message across the Roman world and beyond it, leaving small communities of believers behind in many different places as they moved on to their next destination.

It is instructive to contrast the situation of Jesus' followers upon His departure with what Moses and Mohammed left behind when they died. Jesus went about the country as an itinerant rabbi. Both Moses and Mohammed were undisputed leaders of nations. They left writings, while Jesus' words were passed on by word of mouth. And they left very explicit codes by which to live – what to do and what not to do – and at least the rudiments of organizational structures. Jesus' moral and spiritual teachings, by contrast, were not generally about lists of Dos and Don'ts, but cut to the heart of the matter. Many of his teachings were in the form of parables. His primary instructions for community were "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34-35), and his prayer to the Father that his followers might "be one". And at the time of his death, it seems clear that the disciples had not given much thought to where they would be without him with them, in the flesh. One can only imagine how many questions must have arisen about how to organize a community as it spread like wildfire into distant parts of the world, and to people they never would have dreamed of associating with a few years before.

The evidence of formal institutional structures in the first-century Church is scant and quite debatable. It seems clear enough that, while the apostles were alive, they seem to have been held in the highest esteem by other Christians. Their word, both individually and collectively, was held to have great authority, which only stands to reason as they were the people who had known Jesus best. There is some evidence that, at least when they were able to do so, they tried to make important decisions collectively, such as when they gathered to debate the implications of the first conversions of gentiles, [discussed in the previous chapter]. The Bible also

provides evidence that in the first century Christians in each locality began to have a leader called an *episkopos* – from which we have the word ‘bishop’, though the original meaning is something like “administrator” or “overseer”. In some cases this might be one of the apostles who settled there, but the apostles also appointed people to this office in communities they established through their preaching before moving on. Other community leaders are referred to as *presbyteroi*, or “elders”. This word is sometimes translated as ‘priest’, especially by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, but the Greek word used for Jewish and pagan priests (*hieros*) is not used in the New Testament for a Church office, though it is applied to all Christians. (1 Peter 2:5,9) Acts also reports that, as the community grew, the apostles could no longer manage everything themselves. They could not both keep up their preaching mission and oversee things like distribution of food, clothing, and money to the poor. As a result, the Church began to commission people called *diakonoi* (deacons) to do this work.

There is evidence both in and outside the Bible that first-century Christians were not always of one mind about things. Two issues – the inclusion of gentiles and the relation between faith and works – were discussed in the last chapter. But several stories in Acts and many passages in the letters include the kind of admonitions that are given only when the writer disagrees with something that the recipients, or someone close to them, have been saying or doing. Acts also recounts several stories of people who were using the name of Jesus but had not known him and were not part of his inner circle. In one case, a man named Apollos was preaching only “the baptism of John” for repentance, and did not know about the



Holy Spirit. Some Christians named Priscilla and Aquilla set him straight, and he seems to have become an important Christian evangelist in his own right. (Acts 18) But even so, people apparently formed factions based on whom they had heard the Good News from – Paul or Apollos. (1 Corinthians 3) In another story, a Jewish exorcist tries to invoke the name of “Jesus whom Paul preaches” to cast out demons, but the demons reply “Jesus we know, and Paul we know, but who are you?” and they beat him. (Acts 19:13) In still another, a wonder-worker named Simon Magus tries to pay Peter and John to give him some of the power by which they worked miracles. (Acts 8:9-24) Part of the point of these stories seems to be that the ongoing work of Jesus is exercised through the *community* of his followers, and not by just anyone using his name. The letters of St. John, probably written at a later date than Paul’s letters, reflect a time when some believers had “gone out from us” – that is, gone off to form their own assemblies and preach their own doctrine.

So there is evidence from the New Testament that there were early questions about who should and should not be counted as a Christian, and that while these turned partly upon beliefs, the Church also regarded itself as a *community*, defined in part by its connection to Jesus through the apostles he had commissioned. Certain roles were set up in local Christian communities – bishop, presbyter, deacon – but there is little evidence of a larger institutional structure beyond a loose network of communication between Christian communities and a deference to the apostles collectively as the ultimate living authorities on Christian life and doctrine.

## The Early Church After the Apostles

As a result, the Church was faced with something of a problem as the apostles began to die off. It is believed that John was the last to die, around the year 100 CE. There could be no new apostles, and it was becoming clear that the early Christians' expectation that Jesus would return in their generation had been mistaken. In addition to whatever crisis of faith this might have caused for some, it also created an institutional challenge: how was the Church to understand and organize itself without the leadership of the apostles? One theme that we find emerging in this "post-apostolic" period is the notion of *apostolic succession*: that legitimate leadership of the Church belongs to the bishops and elders that the apostles had commissioned by laying their hands upon them, and to those to whom they passed on these offices in turn. The occasion for this institution was in part to differentiate those who preached the true faith from others who used the name of Jesus but were not in the lineage of the apostles. But it also further defined standards for how *local* church leadership was to be established and passed on.

As I have said, the first century Church did not put much of its energies into institution-building. Today, someone wishing to start a religion might well look into filing as a non-profit organization and map out an organizational structure, but there was no such thing in the Roman world. The early Christians started as a small group of people who had known Jesus and spread the Good News he had commissioned them to preach. There were groups of people in many communities throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond who received it and sought to live

a common life as a local Christian community. They naturally regarded the apostles from whom they had heard the message as authorities on it. As the apostles began dying off, the ongoing local governance of bishops, presbyters, and deacons became the more important, and some of the bishoprics in the larger cities such as Rome, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Antioch came to be regarded as having preeminence and perhaps even jurisdiction over those around them. At first this was because these were the locations of some of the apostles, and later it began to be regarded as a more ongoing authority structure. But it was an authority structure based upon respect and tradition, and not something like the kind of corporate structure where the leaders could rest upon the authority of law. If there was a dispute between the bishops of Rome and Antioch, or between the bishop of Rome and the Christians around Rome, it was a wholly internal matter. They could not appeal to the law, because as often as not the legal authorities would have been happy to feed the lot of them to the lions. And there is a good deal of scholarly disagreement about the extent to which there was centralized authority within the early Church itself. There was certainly a deal of contention over whether, say, the bishop of Rome (later called the Pope) had authority over the bishops of other major cities. (A matter that, as we shall see later, had major implications in the later life of the Church.) And the major controversies in the early life of the Church typically arose when the Christians in one region, or the followers of a particularly articulate and influential bishop or preacher, were discovered to have adopted views different from those of other Christians.

## Constantine and the Ecumenical Councils

But all of this changed in the fourth century, when a Roman general named Constantine, who had become a Christian in 312, became Emperor. Constantine granted Christians religious liberty in 313 and became the Church's patron. It was one of Constantine's successors, Theodosius I, who made Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 380, but Constantine poured a great deal of money into the construction of Christian churches (in the sense of church *buildings*) and, more importantly, attempted to remold the shape of the Church as an institution into forms resembling the governance of the Empire.

I shall return to the relationship between Church and Empire shortly, but one of the most important initiatives Constantine undertook was that of attempting to codify and regularize Christian doctrine. He did this by convening an Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325 CE. ("Ecumenical" is from a Greek word meaning "universal" or "all-inclusive".) This called together leaders (bishops and theologians) from all over the Empire, and one of its chief products was a "Creed" or statement of faith (from the Latin *credo*, or "I believe"). This Creed, which was somewhat revised in 381 at a subsequent ecumenical council held in Constantinople, is known as the Nicene Creed, which became common ground for most of the world's Christians. The final version, as translated in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, reads as follows:

### **The Nicene Creed**

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,

maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.  
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

*(Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 358-*

There had been statements of what Christians believe before, but they had generally been proposed by individual writers for their own congregations or correspondents or emerged out of informal consensus. The Nicene Creed, by contrast, was adopted as an official codification of the orthodox faith, with the implication that those who dissented from it were deemed heterodox and heretical. The particular target of the Nicene Creed was a sect of Christianity called Arianism, described in the last chapter, which held that Jesus was neither exactly God nor

exactly human, but something in-between. The Arians were willing to agree that Jesus was “of *similar* being (in Greek, *homoiousias*) with the Father”, but not “of *one* (or the same) being (in Greek, *homoousias*) with the Father”, the formula contained in the Nicene Creed. As a result, the Council of Nicea ruled that Arianism was a heresy. But, unlike earlier movements that we see hinted at in the New Testament or described in surviving documents of the second and third centuries, Arianism did not simply die out. It was the prevailing form of Christianity among the Germanic tribes with whom Rome was perpetually at war. The Vandals who sacked Rome and conquered much of North Africa, for example, were not, as one might have assumed, pagans who worshipped Odin and Thor, but were predominantly Arian Christians. In the longer reach of history, Arianism disappeared as a form of Christianity and Nicene orthodoxy prevailed, but it took several centuries for this to play itself out.

The *framework* of ecumenical councils – meetings of the chief bishops and theologians of the Church – did not end at Nicea. There were several further councils in the fourth and fifth centuries that addressed further disputes (such as those over Christ’s divine and human natures discussed in the last chapter) and resulted in further splits within the Church. Unlike Arianism and other early Christian sects, these views continued in the form of Christian traditions outside the Roman Empire that still exist today: in the Churches of the East (found today from the Middle East to South Asia) and in Oriental Orthodox Churches of Egypt and east Africa.

Here I think we should take account of something quite striking: that the early divisions over Christian doctrine that have continued to this day also tend to

reflect political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. What we westerners think of as Christian orthodoxy was the form of Christianity found within the borders of the Roman Empire, but other subtly different forms Christianity took root outside of it, in places like the Germanic tribes, Asia, and east Africa. We discussed some of the theological differences between them in the last chapter. But unless you are a philosopher or a theologian, these differences are likely to seem minor and esoteric. I suspect that many readers find it difficult to understand why Christians would divide over such questions as whether the Son is of the *same* being with the father or merely of *similar* being, or whether Jesus had one nature or two. But recall that, in addition to such theological issues, the people who adhered to these slightly-different theologies were in many cases members of different cultures that were separated from one another by geographical and political boundaries. And from an anthropological and sociological perspective, it is little surprise that Christians in far-flung lands, largely isolated from one another, speaking different languages and immersed in different cultures, would have ended up with subtly different theologies. Indeed, if anything, the surprise is that their theologies ended up so similar to one another. And it is little surprise that they would end up operating independently of each other, given the difficulties in travel and communication. In recent years, leaders on all sides seem to have taken a similar view and attempted to work to undo centuries of mutual repudiation and find common ground with the hope of eventually being reunited.

## From the Councils to the Great Schism

What we today call Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy are all descendants of Christianity as it was practiced within the Roman Empire, which at its height included territories extending from the countries now known as Spain and Britain in the west to Turkey in the east, as well as the northern coast of Africa. This was quite a large territory even by today's standards, and the more so in an age before modern transportation and communication. It encompassed dozens of conquered peoples with their own languages and cultures. Like other such empires, it had a central administrative system. But even this employed *two different* languages for law, administration, and higher learning. From Italy westward, and in the corresponding parts of northern Africa, that language was Latin; from Greece eastward and in the parts of Africa bordering on the Middle East, it was Greek.

As I have said, Constantine oversaw the construction of a more explicit organizational structure within the Church, modeled on the Empire's own hierarchic bureaucracy. But by Constantine's day, the Roman Empire had already been divided administratively into two parts, Western and Eastern, by the Emperor Diocletian in 285. The Latin-speaking Western Empire was governed from Rome, and the Greek-speaking Eastern from Constantinople. Constantine temporarily reunited the Empire, but it was permanently divided in 395. Over the following century, the Western Empire was overrun by barbarian tribes of northern Europe, and Rome fell in 485. The Eastern Empire survived for almost another millennium, though its



territory was gradually eroded, principally by Moslem armies, and Constantinople fell in 1453.

What does this bit of Roman history have to do with Christianity? The division of the Empire reflected and ultimately reinforced factors that also affected the Church. The Church within the Roman world was stretched out as far as the Empire itself, and separate theological and spiritual traditions developed in the Empire's two languages, Latin and Greek. And while Constantine may have hoped to give the Church a unified administrative structure modeled on that of the Empire itself, the division of the Empire presented the Church with unforeseen problems. There had always been bishops in Rome and the vicinity of Constantinople (today called Istanbul) who had held particular prestige within the Church, and there had already been disputes as to whether one of them held pre-eminent authority, but these questions were only exacerbated with the establishment of a new Roman capital in Constantinople. (Did the relocation of the imperial capitol imply that the bishop of the new capitol, Constantinople, now had equal or greater status than the Bishop of Rome?) And as the Empire divided and then the Western Empire fell, Latin-speaking and Greek-speaking Christians were increasingly isolated from one another, much as both had been isolated from Christians outside the Empire. While both Latin and Greek Christians thought of themselves as a single church, their traditions were developing separately into what would later become Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The "Great Schism" between Catholicism and Orthodoxy came to a head in 1054, when the Pope (the Bishop of Rome) and the Ecumenical Patriarch (the

Bishop of Constantinople) mutually excommunicated one another. There were indeed some theological disagreements involved in the schism – disputes over whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in communion and whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or from the Father alone – but it was also tied up with political and military tensions between East and West, and perhaps most importantly, with the claims of the Pope to be the supreme religious authority over the entire Church. The eastern churches had adopted a model on which churches in different cultures and jurisdictions operated more independently, though united by a common understanding of doctrinal orthodoxy. The “Patriarchs” of important cities held jurisdiction over their areas, but were understood to be more of a community of equals, and they viewed the Roman Pope as another Patriarch after the same model, and rejected his claims to authority over them. Whatever their views of who was right and who was wrong – or indeed if anyone was truly right – Christians have generally viewed the Great Schism as one of the great tragedies in the history of the Church, as it formally divided the two largest bodies of Christians, at times even making them enemies of one another. Today, both Catholics and Orthodox lament this rupture within Christianity and are seeking ways to resolve the theological differences between them.

In this history we see three things. The first is that the major divisions within Christianity prior to the Reformation more or less reflect the lines of national boundaries and differences in language and culture. In a world without long-distance communication, it was almost inevitable that Christianity would develop separately in the many far-flung regions in which it was planted, and that Christians

in different parts of the world would develop and expand upon what they had inherited from the apostles in somewhat different ways. Indeed, to my mind, it is remarkable that the differences between their beliefs are so *small*. Their theologians indeed see their theological differences as significant; but I suspect that most readers, were they to read about the disputed points, would find many of them to be very difficult to grasp at all, and would probably regard them as things that only a theologian or philosopher could get worked up about. And today, at least, the ancient denominations tend to see one another as *fellow Christians*, albeit Christians who have some deviant beliefs and practices, whereas they might view the ancient Gnostics as having had such different beliefs that they were not really Christians at all, even if the figure of Jesus played a central role in their religion.

The second observation is that Christians regard their theological beliefs as something quite important – important enough that one group of Christians might not allow its members to share communion with another – but do not believe that *all* differences in theology rise to the level of figuring in the question of who counts as a Christian. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox regard one another as Christians, even though they are not in communion with one another. They share the faith commitments expressed in the Nicene Creed, they have the same Bible, and indeed once you account for differences in language, their core practices are essentially alike.

The third observation is that Christians tend to find divisions in the Church quite uncomfortable. They are keenly aware of Jesus' admonition that they should "all be one". But they experience two opposing pulls, which are indeed reflected in

the overtones of the word ‘orthodox’. Recall that this word indicates having beliefs (*doxes*) that are “straight” or “line up” (*orthos*). But there are two ways in which beliefs might be said to line up: with *one another* and with *the truth*. Each Christian tradition believes *its* distinctive beliefs line up with revealed truth, yet they do not always line up with one another. Of course, *many* of their beliefs *do* line up with one another – say, those expressed in the Nicene Creed. And there are many beliefs on which people differ that no one considers relevant to being a Christian, or even an orthodox Christian. The problem is that there are a comparatively few matters over which different groups of Christians both disagree and think that they are sufficiently important to constitute reasons for division. They feel the force of the call to “be one”, and are deeply troubled by their divisions, but they each feel called to hold fast to the faith as they understand and have received it, and have found no way to reconcile these competing obligations.

With the ancient divisions, the urgency to reunite that Christians might otherwise feel has historically been somewhat offset by the fact that different types of Christians lived in different parts of the world and had little direct contact with one another, and the majority of Christians in any given part of the world tended to practice the same form of Christianity. (This was not fully true in border regions or metropolitan centers, and there was a greater mixture of Christians during the Crusades, but is true enough for the most part.) But, at least in Europe, all that changed with the Reformation.

## The Protestant Reformation

Almost every textbook on European history devotes at least a chapter to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, in which many European Christians severed ties with the Roman Catholic Church, leading to a period of civil wars and wars between nations along denominational lines. Some of the most familiar Protestant denominations and traditions came into existence in this period: Lutherans, Calvinists (Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed), Anglicans (the Church of England), Baptists, Mennonites. If this had been the end of the story, there might still be a comparatively small number of Christian denominations. Unlike earlier divisions in the Church, the divisions that occurred in the Reformation were not the result of the deliberations of ecumenical councils, but decisions – sometimes proactive, sometimes forced – by various groups of Christians to separate themselves from Roman Catholicism. But the assumptions that allowed groups of Christians to split off into separate denominations also virtually guaranteed that the process of splitting would continue. The vast majority of the world's thirty thousand denominations are ultimately a result of this process.

Unfortunately, there is no simple single story to be told about the Reformation. The label 'Reformation' is a collective term for a number of events that happened in different European nations, for a variety of reasons, and resulted in a number of distinct forms of Christian belief, religious practice, and community. The Reformers certainly shared a dissatisfaction with the state of Catholicism – a dissatisfaction that was indeed shared by many who remained Catholic. But even

this had several elements. One concern was that the Papacy and the power structure of the Church had become corrupt. The Papacy had become a secular state with its own army, it was largely in the control of a few powerful Italian families, it raised money through taxation of the rest of European Christendom and the sale of documents claiming to forgive sin called “indulgences”, and several of the Popes of the period were morally depraved. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there had indeed been rival claimants to the Papacy, and the Church had become deeply enmeshed in European politics.

It is no accident that it was principally in northern Europe that Protestantism found support from kings and councils, as rulers in places like Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and England feared and resented what they saw as the use of the Church to further the aims of a few powerful Italians. And in a way, organizing church jurisdiction in accordance with national boundaries might seem quite natural. The structures Constantine had set up operated largely within the boundaries of the Roman Empire, with those churches that lay outside its borders developing largely independently and autonomously, and the Great Schism of 1054 more or less mirrored the division of Eastern and Western Empires. The Western Empire had fallen a thousand years prior to the Reformation, and sixteenth century Europeans thought of themselves in terms of the nations or cities in which they resided. The vast majority of them, however, also thought of themselves as Christians, and most of them would have seen this as inseparable from being part of the institutional structure of the Catholic Church centered in Rome.

Indeed, one of the views that had developed in western European Christianity by this time was that an individual's relationship to God comes *through* their relationship to the Church. Not only did the Church administer (and hence control access to) the sacraments, it could withhold access to these as a form of punishment for dissent. The Church could excommunicate individuals, and held that this cut them off from God as well. And if a monarch defied the Church, the Pope could issue an "interdict" suspending the celebration of holy communion within that state, depriving not only the ruler but all of the citizens of that sacrament. Moreover, the Church also considered itself to be the authoritative interpreter of the Bible, and expected its members to conform to its doctrine. And while the doctrinal questions of the first centuries had been settled by ecumenical councils with representatives from across the Christian world, by the sixteenth century Catholic Christianity had accumulated a growing set of doctrines proclaimed by the Pope and a small body of officials and theologians. Christian belief and practice had become something that was grounded, not in the individual believer's direct relationship to God in Christ, but in the doctrines and discipline of that large institution called the Catholic Church.

One of the chief things shared in common by the various strains of Protestantism was a rejection of this view in favor of alternative ways of understanding the relationship between the individual believer, God, and the Church. There are, to be sure, ways in which Protestant denominations differ in their beliefs, both from Catholics and from one another. But these could take hold

only once they had come to the more basic conclusion that Christians had a right, and perhaps even a responsibility, to think about these matters for themselves.

Of course, all of the Reformers started out as members of the Catholic Church – or, more neutrally, as a part of the Western Church that was to divide into Catholicism and various forms of Protestantism. Martin Luther, perhaps the most famous figure in the Reformation, started out as a Catholic monk in the Augustinian order, named for St. Augustine, the fourth/fifth century theologian and bishop who wrote several of the classics of western theology. Some of the ideas that were to become hallmarks of Lutheranism, such as predestination, total depravity, and an absolute emphasis upon salvation through faith, were no doubt inspired by Augustine's views. Yet Luther did not set out to divide the church, but to reform it. His famous 1517 *Ninety-Five Theses* were directed primarily against the recent innovation of selling indulgences – documents from the Pope that supposedly absolved sinners from the need for penance. This was a practice that was clearly corrupt, and Luther was hardly alone in fearing that it would encourage wealthy Christians to try to buy their way out of Purgatory rather than repent and live holy lives. (It was in fact abolished a few decades later, in 1567.) The Theses were in fact written in the form of an academic disputation – the sort of thing that Catholic theologians engaged in routinely – and not as a manifesto for a new form of Christianity. The church, however, tried Luther for heresy and called upon him to recant, and when he refused, he was condemned. His subsequent protection by some of the German princes intertwined the development of a “Lutheran” form of Christianity with an attempt by the German states to free themselves from the



control of Rome. Luther's reply to the call to recant his works gives us some sense of the deeper themes that would characterize Lutheranism:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen. (Brecht, Martin. *Martin Luther*. tr. James L. Schaaf, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985–93, 1:460)

Here we see Luther placing the authority of Scripture and reason above that of Popes and church councils. As his accuser at the trial pointed out, however, “there is no one of the heresies which have torn the bosom of the church, which has not derived its origin from the various interpretation of the Scripture.” Here we see one of the central issues that drove the Reformation, that of how to weigh the sources of authority (scripture, reason, tradition/authority, experience) discussed at the end of the previous chapter. Catholics and Protestants agreed on the importance of scripture, but they disagreed about how it should be interpreted and by whom. Catholics believed that it was the job of the hierarchy of the Church to settle questions of interpretation, and that the ordinary believer was obliged to accept these. Luther and other Protestants held that theologians and even ordinary Christians had a right and even an obligation to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Luther considered this so important that he translated the Bible from Latin into German so that ordinary people could read it for themselves, and Gutenberg's printing press allowed for the mass production of these Bibles. And this, in turn, made possible a form of personal piety centered on individual Bible reading rather than on church services and the sermons of priests and theologians.

Yet Luther was no radical. Lutherans accept the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and the two catechisms (books for instruction in the Christian faith) that Luther wrote are based upon them. The Lutheran Church also retained a governance structure with bishops, though they have no office corresponding to the Papacy, as well as the sacraments of baptism, communion, and penance. Their church services are recognizably akin to those of the Catholic Church. And Luther himself certainly did not view everyone's interpretation of Scripture as being on an equal footing. He viewed the Anabaptists (whom we shall discuss in the next section) as heretics, and came to approve of their violent suppression by the German princes.

Luther's core theological principle was that salvation is a "justification" (a *making-just*) of the believer by God's grace alone, received through faith. This, of course, echoes the point Paul stressed in his Letter to the Romans, and Luther's dispute with Catholicism revived debate about the relationship between faith and works, albeit in terms importantly different from those Paul was writing about. The point of difference between Luther and the Catholic Church was that Catholic theology holds that faith must be accompanied by (or "infused with") love and good works to be efficacious. The Catholic Council of Trent (1545-1563) indeed condemned the view of justification by faith alone, but it certainly did not affirm the view that Paul was arguing against in his letter to the Romans – that a person can be justified by following the Law of Moses. Both Luther and his Catholic opponents believed that salvation requires God's grace, and that this needs to be received through faith. Likewise, all believed in the importance of love and good works and held that these are signs of a life transformed by the Holy Spirit. What we see in the

dispute between Lutherans and Catholics here is a difference over how to unite these commitments into a single theological theory. Luther's point was that a person receives salvation by receiving God's free gift through faith, and that the justification that comes with this is in no way earned through good deeds before or after she receives it. The Catholic point was that, if a person genuinely receives the free gift, she is not only forgiven but infused with divine love that produces good works.

While Lutheranism was developing in Germany, a reform movement was also taking place in Switzerland. Like Luther, his younger contemporary John Calvin also endorsed predestination, irresistibility of grace, and total depravity of the will. The Catholic view is that salvation depends both upon the grace of God and the consent of the believer. When Luther debated free will with the great Catholic scholar Desiderus Erasmus (who also called for reform of Catholicism, but remained within it), Erasmus took the view that God provides a prevenient grace that allows a person to accept or reject salvation, and rejected predestination and the idea that God choose that some will be saved and others damned.

The Lutheran and Calvinist wings of the Reformation were thus clearly motivated in part by theological issues. But theological disputation was no new thing. Catholic theologians were always having debates over theological issues without it causing divisions within the Church. There were two things that were different with the Reformers. The first was that, when Rome asserted its authority on the disputed matters, they did not bow to its authority, and found protection from the Catholic authorities from the leaders of their nations, who had their own

reasons to desire less control from Rome. The second was that they found understandings of being a church that were different from the Catholic model of being part of a *single* church centered in Rome. The Lutheran model for this in fact looked a lot like Catholicism in its offices and worship, but organized within national boundaries. Calvinism began within cities, and adopted a more local form of governance. Because it was not a national church, Calvinism more easily took root in other parts of Europe as well, such as the Puritan movement in Scotland and England. At the same time, England was undergoing its own religious changes, as the Church of England also rejected the authority of Rome. Like Lutheranism, it retained a great deal of the worship and structure of Catholicism (except, of course, for the Pope); and while it did reject some Catholic doctrines, it was not driven by the development of an alternative theology as the Lutherans and Calvinists were. Instead, it adopted a rather minimalist standard of faith – more or less what is contained in the Nicene Creed – and allowed its members great liberty of belief beyond that, partly in an effort to incorporate the many citizens who had either Catholic or Protestant leanings within a common national church.

Doctrine also played a much more limited role in the movements that made up what is called the “Radical Reformation”, which originated in sects like the Anabaptists and whose descendants include Baptists, Mennonites, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Quakers, Seventh Day Adventists, and Congregationalists. These groups tended to reject the very idea of official doctrine along with that of institutional church structures larger than the local congregation. Most rejected

even the historic creeds of the Church – not because they put some alternative creed in its place, but because they rejected the very idea of imposing a creedal standard of faith upon believers. The core idea uniting these movements was that the primary focus of Christianity is the individual's personal relationship with Jesus. In the sixteenth century, this was a stark rejection of the Catholic view that a person's relationship with God is mediated by the institutional Church. Moreover, they viewed Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans as each having replaced one institutional church structure and body of doctrine with another. The Radical Reformers believed, by contrast, that whatever a believer needed to understand about the Christian life would be best revealed through his individual relationship with Jesus and reading or hearing of the Bible. Christian life was indeed to be lived in community, but that community was a local assembly of believers who worshipped the Lord and heard the word of God together. Some of the movements additionally attempted to recreate some of the features they saw described in the portrayal of the first Christians in the Book of Acts, such as simplicity of life and sharing of worldly goods. Some even formed separatist communities, rejecting or rebelling against the governments of the secular states in which they resided. This resulted in a great deal of persecution, whether their nation was Catholic or Protestant.

Two characteristics of the Radical Reformation also came, over the years, to find a place in other Christian traditions that had not sprung from it. The first was evangelistic preaching – that is, preaching whose goal is to inspire people to accept salvation in Christ. This was of course a central feature of early Christianity. But the

early Christians had lived in the midst of non-Christians who had never heard the Good News. People in early modern Europe, by contrast, lived amidst a population that was almost entirely composed of people who were at least nominally Christian. If you believed that being baptized and a member of a church made a person a Christian, you would not have seen much need for evangelism in sixteenth century Europe, where the majority of people had been baptized as infants and were automatically counted as members of their local parish. But if you think that the defining feature of the Christian experience is a moment at which an individual accepts Christ, evangelism is just as important an activity in a Christian nation as it was in pagan Rome. This way of thinking was certainly not absent in Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, or even Catholic churches, and became a central focus of the Methodist wing of the Anglican church. Contemporary Evangelicalism, which is defined by such an emphasis on the salvation experience and religious revivals, emerged from the confluence of these sources.

The second feature is that many of the Radical Reformers took from the early Church an emphasis on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Christians had always believed that the Holy Spirit is at work *sanctifying* believers. But many had regarded miraculous gifts like prophecy as something that had been found in the early Church but were no longer at work. Perhaps a few special saints saw or heard something in a vision, but this was not to be expected as a normal part of the spiritual life of ordinary believers. Teaching and exposition of Scripture became the work of learned theologians and trained preachers. For groups like the Anabaptists and Quakers, however, there was an expectation that the Spirit might speak to anyone in

the congregation, and other members would listen and test what they heard to determine whether it was in fact the Holy Spirit that was speaking.

The greatest explosion of Spirit-centered worship in Christianity, however, came at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Pentecostal movement. Pentecostals believe that all of the miraculous gifts found in the New Testament are still at work: not only prophecy, but also healing, miracles, and especially “speaking in tongues”, in which a person speaks or prays in an unknown language, as the apostles did in Acts 2. (In the late twentieth century, such practices also became more common in Catholic and Protestant churches, where they are called “Charismatic”.) Pentecostalism began in the United States, but has spread like wildfire throughout the world, particularly in the Global South, and is largely responsible for making Christianity the largest and fastest-growing religion in the world today.

## **The Proliferation of Christian Denominations**

This comparatively short discussion of the history of Christian denominations helps to shed some light on the ways that different Christians today understand their faith and their relationship to their congregations and denominations. Eastern Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists often think of themselves very much *as* members of those traditions. They might attend a church of their denomination located a few towns away because they prefer

something about it to the one in their town, but moving to a congregation of a different tradition would feel like a major change in their lives. Moreover, those traditions are organized in units larger than the local congregation, with shared rules and some form of centralized governance or oversight. By contrast, you will also find many Christians today who identify themselves merely as “Christians” or even as “non-denominational Christians”. They are generally members of some congregation, which might in turn be somewhat affiliated with other congregations. (Or even if it is not, it is in a sense a “denomination” unto itself.) But if they were to relocate or become dissatisfied with the church they attend, they would simply look for a congregation where the style of preaching and worship accords with their beliefs and preferred form of worship. They might call themselves “Evangelicals” or “fundamentalists”, but these are not names of denominations, but of styles of belief. (In the United States, the word ‘Evangelical’ means a form of Christianity that emphasizes the conversion experience, and ‘fundamentalism’ denotes a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible.)

It is clear enough how some of the basic features of the Reformation provided the basis for the vast proliferation of Christian denominations we see today. On the one hand, once Christians began to identify themselves in terms of more specific forms of Christian belief, there was an inherent tendency for new disagreements to turn into divisions that would spawn new denominations. On the other hand, once some Christians began to see the primary unit of the Church as the local congregation, and membership in that as a matter of voluntary association, they found larger *organizational* units of the church to be irrelevant or even



undesirable. A new group of Christians meeting together was *ipso facto* a church, regardless of its relationship to other Christians, or even if it had no such relationships at all apart from the fact that they all regarded Christ as their savior. And, without a larger theological community to hash out differences over theological doctrine, denominations, local churches, and individual Christians were freed to adopt any number of variations. These variations, however, are by and large further developments of ways of thinking *about* the core doctrines of creation, sin and the fall, salvation, and sanctification that I discussed in previous chapters, or about the nature of the Church as Christian community.

Let us talk a bit about some of the different forms of organization. At one extreme are the independent churches that are not part of any larger body. These are indeed counted as denominations unto themselves, which is one of the main reasons to number of denominations I have mentioned is so large. But some churches that practice this kind of congregational governance are also affiliated with one another into larger denominations. To take the example of a contemporary denomination that will be familiar to many of my American readers, the Southern Baptist Convention, one of several denominations in the US in the Baptist tradition, explicitly does not consider itself a church. Indeed, its founding documents define a “church” as a local congregation, and they do not recognize any larger organizational unit as a church. [] The Southern Baptists are a coalition of local churches, each of which can send members to the annual convention, where they

discuss issues and efforts at shared ministry and vote on resolutions, but these resolutions are not binding upon the constituent churches.

Other churches, like Lutherans and Anglicans, have retained an “episcopal” style of governance – that is, one in which there are bishops with oversight over many congregations, and a larger body, often organized along national lines. Sometimes, this has resulted in multiple denominations within a single tradition. For example, the English monarch is the “supreme governor” of the Church of England; so when the United States won independence from England, American Anglicans could not very well continue to be “governed” in their religion by the King or Queen of England, and had to form a new self-governing body, now called the Episcopal Church. Other denominations came into being through emerging differences in practice. The Methodist movement, which originally emphasized evangelistic preaching and a particular form of spiritual life (the “Method”), started out as a movement to reform Anglicanism, but the differences became sufficiently pronounced to lead to a separate denomination. (And, like Anglicanism, Methodism takes the form of separate denominations in different nations.) The African Methodist Episcopal Church and the AME Zion Church both emerged in turn from American Methodism as autonomous denominations composed principally of African-Americans in the early nineteenth century, one in Philadelphia, the other in New York. While denominations composed primarily of one racial group became common in America due in part to racism and segregation, in fact a great number of the world’s denominations self-identify along ethnic, cultural, or linguistic lines. For example, the Eastern Orthodox churches share a theology and consider one another

Orthodox, but there are separate self-governing bodies of Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.

Other categories (technically more *traditions* than *denominations*) are really labels for features that a number of otherwise different groups of Christians share in common. There are, for example, denominations called “Congregationalist”, but the word ‘congregationalism’ basically signifies a form of *organization* in which local congregations are autonomous and self-governing. The many Christians today who consider themselves “non-denominational” are generally members of churches whose governance is congregational. Many congregations with this kind of governance structure are also affiliated with one another as denominations that have collective names. Some of these use the word “Congregationalist” in those names, others do not. To take another example, there are numerous denominations that call themselves “Baptist”. (The aforementioned Southern Baptist Convention being one of them.) The word ‘Baptist’ signifies a belief that infant baptism is meaningless – only someone who is in a position to undertake a commitment to Christ for herself is really in a position to be baptized. Baptists thus baptize people only when they are old enough to make a commitment to Christ, as adolescents or adults. Some of the early movements of the radical Reformation were collectively called “Anabaptists” – literally, *re-baptizers*, as they would rebaptize those who had been baptized as children – and the shorter term “Baptist” is applied to many subsequent groups that arose in different places that shared this belief about baptism. Some of them *call themselves* “Baptists”, but others have distinct names, like the Amish and Mennonites.

We are now in a position to see why the Reformation ultimately resulted in such a proliferation of Christian denominations. Once one began to question the idea that Christian unity should take the form of a single religious *institution* with a central organizational structure and official doctrine that all Christians were expected to believe, a door was opened for groups of believers to understand their collective identities in any number of ways – as a nationally-organized church, as a denomination centered around a particular articulation of shared beliefs, forms of worship, or organization (sometimes prominently including those by which they differed from other Christians), by language or ethnic identity. Indeed, many Christians do not even consider denominational affiliation to be significant and describe themselves as “non-denominational”. In short, while many Christian denominations have distinctive beliefs, the mind-boggling number of denominations is not primarily a result of an equal number of distinct doctrines – recall that a great many of those denominations reject the very idea of official collective doctrine – but of a the variety of ways Christians today understand the call to live out their Christian identity collectively.

### **What Attitude Should Christians Take Towards Divisions?**

Christians have always been troubled by their disagreements and divisions. We already see evidence of this in passages in the New Testament where Christians are called upon to “be of one mind” and to avoid factions. (You don’t bother to

admonish people to avoid factions unless they are already forming factions.) And controversies and divisions have always been seen as crises in the life of the Church Universal. Christians cannot help but be aware that both Jesus and the New Testament writers viewed the Church as being in some deep sense “one body” and called Christians to live out a more effective expression of that unity. But, at the same time, Christians also believe that some of the things that they disagree about *matter* – that there are things that a Christian *ought* to believe as a consequence of her basic Christian commitments, and that these are either implied by a proper understanding of scripture or things that the Holy Spirit would lead a person who was really open to instruction to believe. Sometimes, these rise to such a level that some Christians consider other forms of Christianity to be heretical, or even question whether another group should really be considered Christians at all.

I think that there are some sorts of cases where such questions are quite appropriate. If a person describes herself as a Christian, but it turns out that what she means by this is simply that she regards Jesus as an exceptionally wise human being whose moral teachings have influenced her deeply, but she does not believe that he is divine (or at least not in a fashion that other people are not also divine) and regards all of the supernatural elements of the Bible as reflections of the ignorance and superstition of primitive cultures, it seems to me that she has redefined the word ‘Christian’ to her own liking, and in a fashion that disregards the important factors that really unite and distinguish something on the order of two billion human beings as Christians. In a different way, there have been religious groups founded by charismatic leaders who have claimed to have received an

*additional* revelation that transforms or supersedes what is contained in the Bible (for example, Mormonism), or even claimed to be the second coming of Christ (such as Reverend Moon, the founder of the Unification Church, also known as the “Moonies”). People who are members of such groups may well regard themselves as Christians – perhaps even as the *true* Christians – but most Christians regard them as having left Christianity to follow different doctrines. If “Christianity” is to be a meaningful word at all, there are surely cases where differences in belief can rise to a level that a person ought not to be counted as a Christian, even if Jesus figures prominently in their religion and even if they are members of Christian churches.

On the other hand, there are also Christians who have a very narrow view of who is or is not a Christian: that someone cannot *really* be a Christian if, say, they do not accept a substitutionary view of atonement, a literal interpretation of the Bible, or transubstantiation; if they approve of abortion, divorce, or consumption of alcohol; if they baptize infants or if they do not. This, I think, reflects a confusion between two different types of questions. The first is what a person *has* to believe *in order to be a Christian at all*. I have suggested that the list of such beliefs is rather short. The second is what a Christian *ought* to believe about various additional topics. And the question of what a person “ought to believe” has two dimensions. In one sense, what we *ought* to believe is *what is true*. In another, what we ought to believe is the conclusion that is *implied by the evidence we are given*. There may be a fact of the matter about what happens to the bread and wine in communion, or when an infant is baptized, or when a person receives Christ, but the Bible, reason,

and experience may not give us sufficient information to reach a definitive conclusion about what that truth is. It might be something on which sincere and thoughtful Christians can reasonably disagree. Indeed, it might even be something that human minds are unsuited to grasping the full truth about at all. Christians have generally believed that the Bible contains everything a person needs to know *in order to be saved*. If there are theological and moral questions it does not definitively answer, the Christian might reasonably conclude that, however important the question might be, it is not one that a person needs to know the answer to in order to be saved. Moreover, even with questions where good reasoning on the right evidence *would* lead to a definitive conclusion, if a person does not reach the right conclusion, the fault need not be with his relationship to Jesus. It might be that he is not very good at reasoning or has not considered all of the things he ought to take into account in considering the matter. Perhaps Christians should strive to make sure they have considered all of the relevant evidence and to be careful reasoners, but you don't need to be a good reasoner or to have already thought everything through carefully and correctly in order to be a Christian.

What attitude should Christians take towards their disagreements? I think that the New Testament admonitions contain some very important principles: seeking agreement, yes, but also gentleness, patience, and humility. I am a professional philosopher. Careful reasoning is at the core of my profession. You might think that someone who has been a philosophy professor for a quarter century should be an authority with settled views on many topics. If anything, my

experience is quite the reverse. Even when I think I have mastered a topic and drawn a sound conclusion about it, I regularly find myself surprised when someone brings to my attention something I had never considered before which suggests a different way of thinking about it. And this isn't just an experience I have talking to other academic experts. A new insight might just as well come from someone who never finished high school. I may be more accomplished at *reasoning* than most people, but I have not cornered the market on *insight*. If there is one thing that a lifetime of pursuing truth through careful thinking has taught me, it is *humility*. I certainly don't have much confidence in my ability to understand God's deep mysteries, and I am deeply aware that I can learn a great deal from other people.

Here, I think, we have a way of understanding the diversity within Christian beliefs that gives us reason to think that it might not be such a bad thing – indeed, it might be a blessing from God. At very least, we all start out with very partial and imperfect understandings of God and of what he wants to bring about in our lives. If your understanding and mine are different, then striving for agreement through sharing our perspectives, seeking God's guidance together, and even testing our views through argumentation are among the ways we can both be led into deeper understanding. We may not end up agreeing about everything, but we may nonetheless each end up wiser than we started out. But, more than this, what God is working through Christ may well be grander than any single human mind can grasp or live out. If this is the case, the diversity of Christian beliefs, worship, and practices may well be something that allows the Church Universal to express God's nature and his actions in the world far better than could be achieved if we all



believed exactly the same things, worshipped and served in the same ways, and had exactly the same forms of Christian community.