

## *Trinity and Reality*



TRINITY  
AND  
REALITY  
AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Ralph A. Smith

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This book is dedicated to  
my beloved daughter, Emeth Hesed.

חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֶל-יְעֻזְבֵּד  
קִשְׁרָם עַל-גִּרְוֹתַיִךְ  
כִּתְבֵּם עַל-לוּחַ לִבְךָ

Proverbs 3:3



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In February of 2002, Peter Leithart kindly introduced the essays based on these lectures to Doug Jones of Canon Press and apparently recommended them. Doug expressed interest but suggested that they be revised and expanded into a book. Since then, I have been working on it as my time has allowed. It has been a hectic period, and the project took much more time than I thought it would, but Doug's encouragement along the way helped me to complete the work.

I tried to keep footnotes to a minimum since the book is intended for a broad audience, but I should make it clear that nothing in this book is original with me. I was awakened to the comprehensive importance of trinitarian theology when I began to read the works of Cornelius Van Til in 1981. I could not have understood Van Til, however, without the help provided by books and lectures by John Frame and Greg Bahnsen.

Van Til challenged my thinking and opened new vistas for contemplating the doctrine of the Trinity. He showed me that it must be central to Christian



thought and many of his followers have further expounded the implications of his trinitarianism. I have read and profited from many in the Van Tillian school of thinkers, but none more than James Jordan. Jordan's biblical theology is thoroughly trinitarian. It was he who called my attention to the importance of the Trinity in the traditional Reformed doctrine of the Covenant of Redemption. Jordan revised and expanded the traditional view. He demonstrated the link between the Trinity and the covenant and showed how the doctrine of God structures biblical truth. His newsletters *Biblical Horizons* and *Rite Reasons* and his taped lectures on various subjects overflow with trinitarian insights.<sup>1</sup>

The e-mail list associated with the Biblical Horizons ministry allowed me to meet men like Peter Leithart and Jeff Meyers who, along with James Jordan, provided interaction and help on too many issues to name.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com>.

# Introduction

And the Catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal.<sup>1</sup>

IT IS THIS trinitarian confession that distinguishes the Christian religion from all pagan religions and philosophies and every cultic distortion of the Bible. No doctrine of the Christian faith is more important or more profound. Contrary, however, to what is sometimes asserted, this most sublime and incomprehensible doctrine finds its roots in neither philosophical speculation nor mystical vision. It comes to us, rather, through biblical revelation and is assimilated into the everyday experience of the humblest Christian. We all begin the Christian life when, like the Apostle Thomas, we see the nail prints in Christ's hands and the wound in His side, and we fall down before Him exclaiming, "My Lord and My God!" Having believed in Jesus, we pray, as He taught us to pray—and as He Himself prayed in the Garden—"Abba, Father." When we realize that we have been transformed and that God has created us anew, we learn from His Word that His saving Spirit has been poured out upon us and dwells within us as Savior.

<sup>1</sup> "The Athanasian Creed," articles 3-6, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 [1877]), 66.



No teaching of the Christian faith transcends our experience and understanding like the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, no doctrine is so essential to our Christian thought and everyday Christian life. Even the immature or uneducated Christian who cannot express the trinitarian theology, or has never heard the creeds and knows nothing of the traditional formulas—even such a Christian walks in the trinitarian light. For, if he follows the Scripture, he will naturally lift up his prayers to the Father in the power of the Spirit and in the name of the Son.

In spite of its centrality to our faith, however, the doctrine of the Trinity tends to be neglected in our pulpits and absent from our expositions of the Christian worldview. As Carl F. H. Henry rightly protested, “The doctrine of the Trinity is seldom preached in evangelical churches; even its practical values are neglected. . . .”<sup>2</sup> It is not that the essential points are unknown—though perhaps in some churches even that may be a problem—it is more that pastors and their congregations have not really considered the implications of the doctrine. Once the doctrine is proved from Scripture, little more is taught about it. This is a tragedy since the doctrine of the Trinity is the crux of the Christian understanding of the world.

Obviously, an adequate statement of the Christian worldview must find its center in the Trinity, for the Christian God Himself is the heart of the Christian’s understanding of the world. But popular statements of the Christian worldview barely mention the Trinity, let alone make it central.<sup>3</sup> Why neglect the Trinity? Perhaps because many people think the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult. Or perhaps many have decided that the doctrine of the Trinity is theology and the notion of worldview is a sort of pre-theological introduction. In any case, without the Trinity, there is no Christianity and no Christian worldview.

<sup>2</sup> *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5: *God Who Stands and Stays, Part I* (Waco: Word Publishers, 1982), 212.

<sup>3</sup> In James W. Sire’s very helpful book, *The Universe Next Door*, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity is given only one paragraph in his exposition of the Christian faith and is not even included in the index. In Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook on World Views*, the Trinity is mentioned, but it occupies no important place in the exposition of the theistic worldview. The same must be said of Ronald H. Nash’s *Worldviews in Conflict*. See Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook on World Views*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976); Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).



Trinitarianism, moreover, has specific and wide-ranging implications for a Christian discussion of worldview. The neglected but nevertheless profound fact is that all truth finds its source in the truth of the triune God. In this book we will explore the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity for the Christian worldview, aiming at an exposition of the Christian understanding of the world that is both biblical and God-centered, and also (be forewarned!) clear and practical, with strong implications for the Christian life. A trinitarian view of the Christian worldview is more theological and biblical than typical worldview presentations, but it could not be otherwise and remain faithful to the real meaning of “Christian” in the expression “Christian worldview.” For non-Christians, philosophical categories or abstract ideas may suffice as the framework for a discussion of worldview, but for Christians nothing but God Himself can be the basis—not God as an idea or a vague and general benevolent power, but the God of the Bible as Father, Son, and Spirit.

This brings up a special problem. Though the word *worldview* is used in this book, the nature of Christian truth is such that the word *worldview* limits the horizon of the discussion more than is appropriate. The Bible does teach us how to view the world, but the Bible also communicates much more. Its commandments lay out a way of life. Its history is not only the story of the world; it is also our story. Biblical poetry guides our aesthetics as well as our religious sensibility. More than all of this, in the Bible we confront the triune God Himself, who has invested His word with power. The Christian faith, then, is not simply a “view” on the world, and the Trinity is more than just a doctrine.

The advantage of the word *worldview* is that it is so often used to communicate religious ideas in a broad, comparative context. Keeping in mind its limitations, I am using it here in a pregnant sense, including meanings of “story of the world,” “ethical standard,” and “attitude on life.” The Christian worldview defines the world in which Christians live. Since, however, we are still learning about that world, and our understanding of it matures over time, calling it a “view” is not altogether inappropriate in spite of the limitations of the optical metaphor.

Finally, I should state from the beginning that my remarks about non-Christian religions in this book are for the purpose of illustration, in order to help us think about the Trinity more clearly. I realize that these remarks

are general and that Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are too complex to deal with in passing. I hope, however, that even superficially contrasting the biblical worldview with other worldviews will be helpful in clarifying Christian thinking about the triune God.

# I. Basic Trinitarianism

FOR THE Christian, the Trinity is a basic truth—one of the first truths that we learn, even if we do not learn it as a theological statement. How is that so? Like Christians since the age of the apostles, we begin our Christian walk confessing that Jesus—and He alone—can save us from our sins: “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). At the same time, since the earliest days of the Church, it has been clearly understood that only God can save. Two propositions: *Jesus is my Savior* and *Only God can save*. The inescapable conclusion was reflected in the faith of the first Christians: Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). The apostle Paul, therefore, quoted from the following passage in Isaiah when he spoke of the Lord Jesus.

Assemble yourselves and come;  
Draw near together,  
You who have escaped from the nations.  
They have no knowledge,  
Who carry the wood of their carved image,  
And pray to a god that cannot save.  
Tell and bring forth your case;  
Yes, let them take counsel together.  
Who has declared this from ancient time?  
Who has told it from that time?  
Have not I, the LORD?

And there is no other God besides Me,  
A just God and a Savior;  
There is none besides Me.  
Look to Me, and be saved,  
All you ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.  
I have sworn by Myself;  
The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness,  
And shall not return,  
That to Me every knee shall bow,  
Every tongue shall take an oath. (Is. 45:20–23)

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

We may say that confessing faith in the truth of the Trinity is a fuller and more theologically sophisticated way of confessing faith in Jesus as Savior. To deny the Trinity, therefore, is to deny Jesus.

## **Biblical Basis of Trinity**

Not a few who claim to be Christians deny the Trinity because, they say, the Trinity is not biblical. Sometimes these are confused young Christians who are troubled by the fact that the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible. More often these are people like modernist Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons who are ensnared in false ideologies fundamentally contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Given the confusion that exists about the doctrine of the Trinity, it is important to preface our discussion of its implications by briefly setting forth the basis for our belief in the Trinity.

Most Christians are familiar with one or more of the ancient creeds. These statements of trinitarian doctrine are carefully worded formulations, theologically dense and complex. To appreciate any one of them fully would require extensive exposition, but the essence of what they express can be stated simply. The ancient creeds are all based upon clear biblical teaching that can be summed up in a short series of propositions. All Christians



agree on each of the basic propositions that form the foundation for trinitarianism, though Christians sometimes disagree on (1) how to explain the relationships between these basic statements and (2) what other biblical teachings might be added to the basic list to fill out the doctrine of the Trinity. This implies that all branches of the Church are unified in their basic confession of the Trinity so that whatever variations exist do not undermine the confession of trinitarian faith. It means that Christians are united in their view of who God is. The Church is one. It also means that whoever does not agree with these basic biblical foundations for the trinitarian faith is, by definition, not a Christian.

**The word *Trinity*, though it is not found in the Bible, is used as “theological shorthand.”**

Before stating these basic propositions, it is important to say a few words about the often-noted fact that the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible. Christians ask or are asked why, if the word is not in the Bible, do they use it? The answer is simple and has nothing to do with some conspiracy to add something to the Bible that really is not there. The word *Trinity* is used for theological and practical convenience—it is “theological shorthand,” a single word that sums up a series of biblical teachings. Instead of repeating the whole series every time we speak of God, we substitute a single word that summarizes the truth.

What, then, are these basic biblical propositions? The basic truth, which all Christians agree upon, can be expressed in five propositions.

1. There is one God.
2. The Father is God.
3. The Son is God.
4. The Spirit is God.
5. The Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguishable persons in relationship with one another. They are not merely different names for the one God.

By way of introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, it is appropriate to demonstrate briefly that these five propositions are truly biblical. The following is certainly not a comprehensive demonstration, for the biblical evidence for the truth of the Trinity is far too copious to be set forth in any short essay, or even in a short book. To illustrate the abundance of the evidence, one theologian offered this analogy: Crystals of salt that appear

on the beach after the tide has receded may be the most apparent proof that the sea is saltwater, but every bucket of water drawn from the ocean testifies clearly to the fact.<sup>1</sup> A full exposition of the Trinity would require volumes; here are a few crystals.

1. There is one God (Deut. 6:4; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Kgs. 19:15; Is. 37:16; 44:8; Mk. 12:28–34; I Cor. 8:4–6; I Tim. 2:5; Jas. 2:19). That the Bible teaches this proposition is not disputed.
2. The Father is God (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:3; 8:6; 15:24; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 4:6; Phil. 4:20). Again, this proposition is seldom disputed.
3. The Son is God. Because this proposition is frequently denied, I give a fuller statement of the evidence, but it still only scratches the surface.
  - a. The Son is called God (Jn. 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8).
  - b. The Son is given divine names (Jn. 1:1, 18; Acts 5:31; I Cor. 2:8; Jas. 2:1; Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).
  - c. The Son has divine attributes.
    - i. Eternity (Jn. 1:2; 8:58; 17:5; Rev. 1:8, 17; 22:13).
    - ii. Immutability (Heb. 1:11, 12; 13:8).
    - iii. Omnipresence (Jn. 3:13; Mt. 18:20; 28:20).
    - iv. Omniscience (Mt. 11:27; Jn. 2:23–25; 21:17; Rev. 2:23).
    - v. Omnipotence (Jn. 5:17; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 1:8; 11:17).
  - d. The Son does divine works.
    - i. Creation (Jn. 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16–17).
    - ii. Salvation (Acts 4:12; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 5:9).
    - iii. Judgment (Jn. 5:22; 2 Cor. 5:10; Mt. 25:31–32).
  - e. The Son is worshipped as God (Jn. 5:22–23; 20:28; I Cor. 1:2; Phil. 2:9–10; Heb. 1:6).
4. The Spirit is God. Those who accept the biblical evidence for the deity of the Son seldom have trouble understanding the evidence for the deity of the Spirit.
  - a. The Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 3:17).
  - b. The Spirit is given divine names (Mt. 12:28).
  - c. The Spirit has divine attributes (I Cor. 2:13–14; Gal. 5:22; I Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:7; 9:14; I Jn. 5:6–7).

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield refers to a “remark” of Dr. Dale in “The Deity of Christ,” *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 1 (Nutley, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 153.



- d. The Spirit does divine works (Jn. 6:33; 14:17, 26; 16:13; Acts 1:8; 2:17–18; 16:6; Rom. 8:26; 15:19; I Cor. 12:7–11).
  - e. The Spirit is worshipped as God (Mt. 12:32).
5. The Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguishable persons in relationship with one another. They are not merely different names for the one God.
- a. The Son prays to the Father (Jn. 11:41–42; 17; Mt. 26:39 ff.).
  - b. The Father speaks to the Son (Jn. 12:27–28).
  - c. The Father, Son, and Spirit—all three—appear together, but are clearly distinct from one another (Mt. 3:16–17).
  - d. The Father sends the Son and the Spirit, and the Son sends the Spirit (Jn. 3:17; 4:34; 5:30; 6:39; 14:26; 15:26; 16:7).
  - e. The Father and Son love one another (Jn. 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9–10; 17:24).

This small fraction of the larger biblical basis for believing in the Trinity is clear enough and should suffice as a starting point for anyone who is willing to learn. Now that the biblical basis for believing these five propositions has been set forth, we may restate them as two: (1) God is one, and (2) God is also three persons in relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the essence of the doctrine of the Trinity. In various branches of the Church, slightly different language has been used to express this truth, but the doctrine is the same. There is one and only one God, and the one true God is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## The Trinity and Logic

Though it is clearly the teaching of the Bible, cultic groups and atheists often complain that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a contradiction. How can there be one God and at the same time three who are called God? Christians seem to be saying that  $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ . This is simply bad arithmetic, we are told, not profound theology. The fact is, however, that the doctrine of the Trinity neither involves nor implies a contradiction. How, then, does a Christian explain that God is both one and three at the same time? The answer, in part, is that He is not one in precisely the same way that He is three. Trinitarianism would be a contradiction if it affirmed that God is one and three in precisely the same sense, but no one in the history of the Church has ever taught such a view. All the same, this is only a partial answer.

The deeper problem with every Christian attempt to define the Trinity is the brute reality that God is very hard to describe, especially if we try to reduce our definition to philosophically precise terms. We can say that God is three  $x$  and one  $y$ , but trying to develop full and precise definitions for  $x$  and  $y$  becomes exceptionally complicated. However, to conclude contradiction from complexity is rash folly. There is a very great difference between something being a demonstrated contradiction and something being incomprehensible. The doctrine of the Trinity could be demonstrated to be a contradiction if one could show that Christians are claiming something like “ $p$  and not- $p$ ” at one and the same time and in precisely the same sense—which is not the Christian idea at all.

**There is a very great difference between something being a demonstrated contradiction and something being incomprehensible.**

## Mystery

The Trinity is a mystery, a truth beyond our comprehension. But some object that words like “incomprehensible” are just a nice way of saying “contradiction.” What is the difference between a mystery and a contradiction? We have defined a contradiction as the assertion of  $p$  and not- $p$  at the same time and in the same relationship. A mystery may be defined as a paradox, something that looks like it might be a contradiction but for which we have good grounds to believe to be true. The doctrine of the Trinity appears to us to be a contradiction because in the human world, a personal being is mono-personal.<sup>2</sup> We would not believe that God is three persons in one being unless we had reasons. What are our grounds for believing the Trinity to be true? The fact that the Bible teaches us the five truths cited above is the foundational evidence of the truth of the Trinity. Unless a person believes that the Bible is revelation from God Himself—inscripturated truth—there could be no compelling reasons for believing in a mystery so sublime.

The notion of the Bible as truth, however, is not what is ultimately persuasive. A theological truth would hardly satisfy us if we did not know Jesus Himself. As He put it, His sheep hear His voice because they know Him

<sup>2</sup> This is true even of those with a so-called “multiple personality disorder.”



(Jn. 10:4, 14). To know Jesus is to know Him to be God the Son. Because we believe in Him, we receive His testimony about the Father and the Spirit. Our knowledge of God is also dependent on the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit bears witness with our spirit (Rom. 8:16). God the Father, the Creator and Lord, manifests Himself in the world around us and in our very souls so that we cannot escape knowing Him (Rom. 1:18–20; Ps. 19). Thus, our knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity and our confession of its truth depend in the final analysis on the fact that we have a personal knowledge of the triune God Himself. David said, “In Thy light we see light” (Ps. 36:9). So also, because we know God Himself, we are able to learn the Scriptures and receive their testimony.

For some, it is offensive to think that the Christian faith has at its very center a mystery, an incomprehensible truth. To them, Christians seem to be calling for a sacrifice of the intellect on the altar of religious confession. In reality, trinitarian faith demands something quite different. It is not a sacrifice of the intellect, but the sacrifice of *the pretense of intellectual autonomy*: the notion that the mind or reason of man is the ultimate judge of truth. The truth of the Trinity requires us to accept what we cannot fully comprehend. Why should that be thought so extraordinary? There is no branch of knowledge, be it physics or biology or history or literature, that does not confront us with paradox in some form or other. Why should the Christian doctrine of God the triune Creator be any less difficult to state and comprehend than truths of physical science or postulations of secular philosophy?

Physics, for example, may be science, but it also has its mysterious side, and not just for the uninitiated. Consider a few illustrations from this epitome of hard science and rational explanation. Steven Weinberg, Nobel prize-winning physicist, claims that “we think we are beginning to catch glimpses of the outlines of a final theory,”<sup>3</sup> which would mean, among other things, “*quantitative* understanding of phenomena.”<sup>4</sup> This means a theory in which *everything* is explained in numbers and formulas in accordance with the principles of rational science. To be *final*, the theory must be *total*. However, Weinberg also writes, “The most extreme hope for science is that we will be able to trace the explanations of all natural phenomena to final laws and

<sup>3</sup> Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Fundamental Laws of Nature* (London: Vintage, 1993), ix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

historical accidents.”<sup>5</sup> Given the sheer quantity of historical factuality, this “most extreme hope” threatens to set the limits of explanation far short of totality. Having already radically qualified the hope of a final theory, Weinberg further adds, “Not only is it possible that what we now regard as arbitrary initial conditions may ultimately be deduced from universal laws—it is also conversely possible that principles that we *now* regard as universal laws will eventually turn out to represent historical accidents.”<sup>6</sup>

Where does this leave us? Not only can we never, even in our most extreme hope, imagine that we will get beyond the brute fact of “accident,” which in the nature of the case is beyond explanation, we also cannot be certain that some of what we now regard as *universal principles* of science will not turn out to be the haphazard play of historical flux! When all is said and done, Weinberg is telling us that we cannot avoid mystery—the inexplicable, the accidental.

Though Weinberg may not be altogether straightforward about admitting the reality of mystery in our “total theory,” he is very frank in admitting his problems with at least one aspect of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg’s work: “If the reader is mystified at what Heisenberg was doing, he or she is not alone. I have tried several times to read the paper that Heisenberg wrote on returning from Helgoland, and, although I think I understand quantum mechanics, I have never understood Heisenberg’s motivations for the mathematical steps in his paper.”<sup>7</sup> Weinberg, in a very important sense, cannot follow Heisenberg’s math. It’s a mystery.

We need to reflect very briefly on a broader point, the importance of Heisenberg for modern physics, which is clearly stated by one of the twentieth century’s foremost physicists, Richard Feynman.

The uncertainty principle “protects” quantum mechanics. Heisenberg recognized that if it were possible to measure the momentum and the position simultaneously with a greater accuracy, the quantum mechanics would collapse. So he proposed that it must be impossible. Then people sat down

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 29. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 53. Note that Weinberg is not speaking of the whole notion of the uncertainty principle, but of the mathematics of the 1925 paper, which he refers to as “pure magic.” More is involved than just the motivations behind the steps; Heisenberg and physicists like him “do not seem to be reasoning at all.”



and tried to figure out ways of doing it, and nobody could figure out a way to measure the position and the momentum of anything—a screen, an electron, a billiard ball, anything—with any greater accuracy. Quantum mechanics maintains its perilous but accurate existence.<sup>8</sup>

Does it sound like good old rationality to say that the certainty of uncertainty *protects* quantum mechanics? At this point, we have seen that notions like uncertainty and accident are essential to the most essential science, physics. But there is more. We have to add Bell's theorem to the picture.

What is Bell's theorem? Contrary to what physicists normally think about the way gravity and other forces work in the world, John Stewart Bell proposed that reality is *non-local*. Local forces, such as the electromagnetic force and gravity, become weaker as distance increases—the farther away one is from the earth, the less he is influenced by earth's gravity. That is part of what we mean when we say a force is "local." Bell claims, however, that underlying what we regard as everyday local reality is a web of non-local forces and causes. What his theorem means has been stated like this: "our phenomenally local world is in actuality supported by an invisible reality which is unmediated, unmitigated, and faster than light."<sup>9</sup> What does this mean? "A non-local interaction jumps from body A to body B without touching anything in between." Even light travels through space in a local fashion, "touching" things, and its speed can be measured. How, then, might we illustrate a non-local interaction? We are told, "Voodoo injury is an example of a non-local interaction."<sup>10</sup>

Bell's theorem may sound like a sideshow in physics, but it is "based on the same EPR experiment used by Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen to demonstrate the existence of hidden 'elements of reality' which quantum theory neglects to describe."<sup>11</sup> Physicists have not been able to refute the argument of the EPR experiment or explain the "elements of reality," so we have what is called the "EPR paradox." Without going into the details of how Bell started from the EPR paradox and concluded that reality is non-local, the

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. Feynman, *Six Easy Pieces: Essentials of Physics Explained by Its Most Brilliant Teacher* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 138.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Herbert, *Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics: An Excursion into Metaphysics and the Meaning of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 227.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

sum of the matter, according to Nick Herbert, is that “Bell’s result does not depend on the truth of quantum theory. . . . When quantum theory joins the ranks of phlogiston, caloric, and the luminiferous ether in the physics junkyard, Bell’s theorem will still be valid. Because it is based on facts, Bell’s theorem is here to stay.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, in modern physics, one of the most solid and certain theorems posits a non-local universe—a world which superficially appears to be controlled by local forces, but is actually characterized by forces that work in a manner similar to “voodoo injury.”

One could illustrate *ad infinitum* the fact that all disciplines of knowledge confront paradox. As we have seen, even physics, the heart of modern rationalistic science, proposes as one of its most indubitable theses a belief in the inexplicable on the basis of what we think we know, with the provision that what many now regard as universal laws may turn out to be historical happenstance. If John Bell can believe in something akin to voodoo and Steven Weinberg can confess that what he now believes to be a universal law of physics may turn out to have been a spastic convulsion of the cosmos, I cannot imagine any reason in the world why I, as a Christian, should feel the least bit embarrassed about the fact that I believe in the revealed mystery of the Trinity!

## Faith

Even more fundamental than the fact that everyone faces mystery is that all men, no matter how rational they believe themselves or their science to be, cannot overcome the fact that *they live by faith*. Contrary to the hopes of rationalists of past days, Descartes’ highly respected method of doubt does not lead to rational foundations for thought. Modern philosophy generally recognizes the points made by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he asserted, “If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.” And, “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 17e–18e.



Wittgenstein is not speaking of a certainty that is based upon rational proof of the foundations of our beliefs. Rather, Wittgenstein believes that we all have what he calls a “world-picture” that we have learned from childhood. It is not acquired through a process of doubt and proof but through faith in what our parents and others taught us and the confirmation of our beliefs by experience—a circular and uncertain process. Philosophical justification must come to an end in belief. According to Wittgenstein, “The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing.”<sup>14</sup>

Wittgenstein’s point may be illustrated from a fundamental assumption called “the principle of induction.” Bertrand Russell explains what it means:

It is obvious that if we are asked why we believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, we shall naturally answer, “Because it always has risen every day.” We have a firm belief that it will rise in the future, because it has risen in the past. If we are challenged as to why we believe that it will continue to rise as heretofore, we may appeal to the laws of motion: the earth, we shall say, is a freely rotating body, and such bodies do not cease to rotate unless something interferes from outside, and there is nothing outside to interfere with the earth between now and to-morrow. Of course it might be doubted whether we are quite certain that there is nothing outside to interfere, but this is not the interesting doubt. The interesting doubt is as to whether the laws of motion will remain in operation until to-morrow. If this doubt is raised, we find ourselves in the same position as when the doubt about the sunrise was first raised.<sup>15</sup>

To this problem, Russell answers, “The only reason for believing that the laws of motion will remain in operation is that they have operated hitherto, so far as our knowledge of the past enables us to judge.” But then, our knowledge of the past has no empirical authority for the future. And it will not work to say that in our past experience the future has always turned out to be like the past, for our past experience of what was then future cannot tell us anything about our future experience of the future. This is not to say that philosophy recommends that we should not believe in the principle of

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24e. Believing is “groundless” in the sense that philosophers cannot build the kind of “foundation” that the rationalist seeks. For the Christian, of course, God Himself is the ground of our faith. But a revealed mystery that can be known only in a living personal relationship is not the kind of “foundation” a rationalist admits.

<sup>15</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1959), 61.

induction. On the contrary, what Russell recommends is *faith*.

Starting with the common beliefs of daily life, we can be driven back from point to point, until we come to some general principle, or some instance of a general principle, which seems luminously evident, and is not itself capable of being deduced from anything more evident. . . . But beyond that [the inductive principle], there seems to be no further regress. The principle itself is constantly used in our reasoning, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously; but there is no reasoning which, starting from some simpler self-evident principle, leads to the principle of induction as its conclusion. And the same holds for other logical principles.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, we will have to accept a great deal on faith in order to be able to think philosophically at all. Not just the law of induction is based upon faith—all other logical laws are too. We cannot prove the laws of logic without presupposing them. We must first believe them even to discuss them. All of this illustrates the point: faith is not the enemy of reason; it is the prerequisite.

This relates to the issue of paradox, too. It should be abundantly apparent by now that although we do not have to accept every paradox that the experts proclaim, if we attempt to reject all that appears paradoxical, our perspective will be so grotesquely narrow we will not find room to stand. Even the non-Christian must admit the inexplicable and paradoxical into his worldview. The more basic and important issue is the non-Christian, no less than the Christian, is forced to live by faith, however much he wishes it otherwise. At some point, there must be an end to the question “How do you know?” And there are always questions that cannot be answered—some “not yet” and others “maybe never.” The non-Christian ends the quest for ultimate answers in various ways, but in each case, he cannot avoid saying, essentially, “This is as far as I can go; beyond this point, there is no choice but faith.”

For the Christian, however, faith does not mean “groundlessness.” The end of the Christian quest is not simply acquiescence, as if to say, “Well, we have to stop the questions somewhere, and it might as well be here.” For the

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., III–12.



Christian, mystery is never ultimate. The non-Christian may think he is imposing rational order on a world that is ultimately mysterious, but the Christian knows the God who is not a mystery to Himself. The problem of the “One and the Many,”<sup>17</sup> which leaves us befuddled, is not equally a conundrum to God. He perfectly knows Himself and the world. When we know Him, therefore, we are living in the light of His knowledge and truth. The world is ultimately rational and meaningful, for the Christian confesses with the certainty of faith, “I know the One who is the Truth, or, rather, He has made Himself known to me.”

Is this a less satisfying answer than the non-Christian’s? If astronomy and nuclear physics amaze us with mysteries and dumbfound us with the unfathomable aspects of the physical universe, should it seem so odd that the Christian doctrine of the universe’s Creator contains paradoxes? Why should Christians alone be required to render the inscrutable scrutable?

### A Basic Implication of Trinitarianism

The truth that defines a Christian as a Christian, our faith in the triune God, is *revealed* truth. It cannot be discovered by scientific or empirical methods, though science may offer interesting illustrations. The only way for the doctrine of the Trinity to be known is for God Himself to tell us. And since God is a person, that makes good sense. After all, we can only know a person to the degree that he opens up to us and tells us about himself—what he really thinks, what his purposes and desires are.<sup>18</sup> If our common experience shows that we cannot know a man unless he is willing to show us who he is, why should anyone find it strange that we cannot know God unless He reveals Himself to us?

Furthermore, if the central truth of the Christian religion can be known only by submitting one’s mind to a message from God, we should not be surprised to discover that the less important truths of the Christian worldview also must be known through faith in Him. In the same way that we know persons largely through their self-revelation to us, we also know their works through their words. Apart from a man’s explanation of why he is doing

<sup>17</sup> For an explanation of the problem of the “One and the Many,” see the next chapter.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, we can accurately guess a great deal about a person from the way he looks, dresses, etc. People do accidentally reveal things about themselves they didn’t intend to tell.

what he is doing, what he seeks, what his fundamental motivation is, and what he regards to be the ultimate meaning of his work, I may not be able to guess (though it is true that in the case of a man, I have other less direct means at my disposal). When we are speaking of the infinite God, who transcends our knowledge and understanding, it is far more clearly the case that He must reveal the meaning of his works for us to know them. Christianity, therefore, is a religion of revelation.

This does not mean—as it has too often been thought and taught to mean—that only the truth about God Himself and the way of salvation must be revealed, as if we could find out the rest for ourselves. It is not that simple. All truth must be grounded in God's self-revelation and checked against the standard of His Word. Thus, the Apostle Paul says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). How could it be otherwise, when we know that "All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist" (Col. 1:16–17)? Jesus is the secret of the world, the hidden yet revealed truth that underlies, fills, and surrounds all other truth. And the Father is sharing that secret with us all in His Word.

Scripture is the key that unlocks every treasure chest—not just the treasures of theology, but also those of biology, history, literature, and child psychology. This does not mean that the Bible teaches us all we need to know about all of these subjects, nor does it mean that research and study of sources other than the Bible is illegitimate or unimportant. It means that God's revelation in His Word is our ultimate standard for judging all that we know and learn, while it presupposes that God is revealing Himself in every thing that He created and in the process of history as well.

A trinitarian worldview is a revealed worldview, a perspective that comes to us as personal knowledge, which is granted to us by grace. Just as the Father loved Jesus and therefore showed Him all things (Jn. 5:20), the Father loves us and shows us all that we need to know to live our lives in happiness and joy (Jn. 14:21–23). To know the truth, we must seek it first in God's Word and then also in the world that He has created. God is not stingy. He does not withhold His Word, but manifests Himself everywhere.

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
And the firmament shows His handiwork.



Day unto day utters speech,  
And night unto night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech nor language  
Where their voice is not heard.  
Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their words to the end of the world.  
In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,  
Which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,  
And rejoices like a strong man to run its race.  
Its rising is from one end of heaven,  
And its circuit to the other end;  
And there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Ps. 19:1–6)

## Review Questions

1. How do Christians first come to know the doctrine of the Trinity?
2. Outline the biblical basis for believing in the Trinity.
3. Outline the reasons for believing in the deity of Christ.
4. Outline the evidence that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons.
5. Why do some people claim that the Trinity is a contradiction?
6. What is the difference between a mystery and a contradiction?
7. What is the contradiction implied in Weinberg's "most extreme hope"?
8. What is Bell's theorem?
9. Explain why all men must live by faith.
10. What does it mean to say that Christianity is a revealed worldview?



## 2. Personhood and Harmony

THE IMPLICATIONS OF the doctrine of the Trinity are far-reaching and deep. How could it be otherwise? God is the infinite, incomprehensible, transcendent Lord. He is also the Father, who is always near us. When we consider the implications of trinitarianism, we are meditating on who He is and how He reveals Himself to us. Because of His majesty and greatness, we are confronted with mystery—but the mystery is neither dark nor foggy. It is the radiant luster of God's light that overwhelms us. The Christian God is a mystery to us but not to Himself. The Persons of the Trinity have an absolute knowledge of one another. In the mind of God, truth is an entirely rational and perfect system, for God cannot contradict Himself (2 Tim. 2:13; Tit. 1:2; Jas. 1:13, 17).

To fully unfold the meaning or the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity is not possible for us, but we can seek light in His light and discover basic truths that are neither difficult nor controversial, though often neglected in discussions of the Christian worldview. Specifically, from the simple confession of the Trinity we considered in the last chapter, we find that at least two important and fundamental implications flow. One, the Christian worldview is a radically personal worldview. Two, in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Christians find the solution to the most fundamental problem for understanding reality. In this chapter, we will briefly consider each of these.

## A Personal God and a Personal World

Of all the gods in all the religions of the world, only the triune God of the Bible is truly and wholly personal. This point is often not recognized, so we will dwell on it briefly. First, consider the non-Christian theism embraced by Jews<sup>1</sup> and Muslims, the belief in a single god who rules the world. By itself, theism will not suffice to give us a truly personal god, for a god who is utterly and simply one—a mere *monad*—fails to have the qualities we know to be essential to personality. Although an absolute monad, like the god of Islam, is the most exalted non-Christian idea of deity, a monad is a being who is eternally alone—with no other to love, no other with whom to communicate, and no other with whom to have fellowship. In the case of such a solitary god, love, fellowship, and communication cannot be essential to his being. Indeed, they are no part of the monad at all. But without these qualities it is difficult to imagine that the deity so understood is in any meaningful sense personal. To conceive of a god who does not know love, a god who has never shared, a god for whom a relationship with another is eternally irrelevant, is to conceive of an abstraction, an idea or a thing more than a person.<sup>2</sup>

**A god who is utterly and simply one fails to have qualities essential to personality.**

If, to make his god more personal, a believer in such a deity suggested that his god loved the world *after* he created it, the result would be a god who changes in time and who needs the world in order to grow into his self-realization as a god of love—a god who becomes personal only with the help of the creation. Suppose one asserted that the monad loved the world

<sup>1</sup> Although I place Jews together with Muslims here, the Jewish doctrine of God is more complicated. Jews do less “theology” and more wrestling with what God is doing. Some are quite speculative and virtually “Muslim” in their doctrine of the God, but others eschew the possibility of a doctrine of God.

<sup>2</sup> Love itself takes on a different meaning in such religions. For example, speaking of the concept of love in Islamic mysticism, Josef van Ess writes: “Though love as a religious category may take a very prominent place in mysticism, still this is not, on the whole, a love between equal partners, but a love in which one of the partners, namely God, gradually takes the place of the other. For the human being this means not integration, but disintegration; fulfillment, but rather in the sense of depersonalization.” Hans Kung, Josef van Ess, Heinrich von Stietencron, and Heinz Bechert, *Christianity and World Religions: Paths to Dialogue*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 73–74.



from eternity? Then the personality of this deity and his attribute of love would still depend for their existence on the world he created. Creation would be a necessary act of self-becoming. For, unless this deity created the world, he could not realize the love that had been eternally hidden in him, waiting for its time to shine forth.

In either case, we would have theism of a sort. Both cases would be attempts to obtain a monad for whom love had some meaning. However, these attempts succeed in exalting the monad ethically by demoting him ontologically, for he is no longer absolute, no longer transcendent. We would have to admit that he could no longer truly be god, and that a god who varies or a god who is dependent on the world that he creates is not worthy to be regarded as a deity. Be that as it may, in either of these cases, though the idea of love has been imported into an inchoate theism, we are clearly far from the biblical concept of a personal fellowship of love among equals. Of course, neither orthodox Jews nor orthodox Muslims imagine their god as a changing or contingent being. They would not think of revising their views of god to enhance his image and compensate for his lack of personal qualities. It follows that they must be satisfied with a god who exists in an eternal vacuum, even though they will find irresistible the temptation to ascribe personality to the monad.

What we have said here about love applies to other attributes of God also. In the Bible, words like *righteousness*, *faithfulness*, and *goodness* refer to divine attributes that ultimately require the doctrine of the Trinity. None of these notions can be defined biblically apart from the relationships between Father, Son, and Spirit. Even outside of the biblical worldview, they cannot really be defined apart from the context of interpersonal relationship. Righteousness for a lonely monad simply has no specific content. Righteousness for the triune God means that each of the persons respects and preserves the boundaries of the others. The Father honors the Son and does not allow the infringement of what belongs to the Son. Goodness refers to their mutual seeking of blessing for one another, faithfulness to their keeping their word with one another. In the absence of a relationship among persons, these and similar words become so utterly abstract that meaning disappears. They may describe the monad's relationship to the world, but that brings up the same problems that appeared when we considered the meaning of love.

If Muslims and Jews applied their notion of god consistently to their worldview, man's personality, too, would be found to lack ultimate meaning. Things that we rightly regard as essential to man's personhood—that man speaks, laughs, and loves—could only be accidental truths at best. Nothing in the deity would correspond to social relations. This raises a question: What would it mean to say that we are created in the image of the lonely monad? If man is thought to be like such a god, what impact would that have, for example, on our notion of the ideal life in this world? Should it be one that lacks these personal qualities or transcends them? What about the idea of heaven? Should man look forward to an eternity of silent self-contemplation?

In warning us against false worship, the Bible reminds us that we become like what we worship. If we worship gods that have mouths but cannot speak, that have eyes but cannot see, and that have ears but cannot hear, then we, too, will become dull and senseless (Ps. 115:2–8). The same applies to the monad. To worship a god who is less than the biblical God of love results in a gradual transformation of the individual and the culture into something less human and less loving.<sup>3</sup>

If bare theism fails to be personal, what about polytheism? At least there is more than one who is called god. Could the gods be personal? Superficially, polytheism may seem to be personal. Upon reflection, however, it becomes clear that a system of many gods also fails to provide a source of personal meaning. In addition to the fact that the gods tend to vary from place to place and time to time, it is clearly the case that in no polytheistic system are the personal deities of polytheism ultimate. Usually they are themselves determined by a higher principle, whether fate or something similar, which makes the impersonal ultimate.<sup>4</sup> It is also common for them to be in competition with one another over matters of authority because of

<sup>3</sup> Because Jews and Muslims borrow from a trinitarian Bible, their beliefs in many respects are better than could be obtained from logically deducing truths from their doctrine of God. The same may be said about Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Also, because all men are created in God's image, even those who deny Him most vehemently may be morally upright. We do not cease to be what God created us to be simply because we adopt a false view of the world.

<sup>4</sup> "But above all the gods is fate, a blind, inscrutable 'will' to which even Zeus must yield." W. T. Jones, *The Classical Mind*, vol. I of *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 5.



conflicting wills and divergent plans for the world. Their mutual rivalries end in ways that they themselves cannot anticipate because none of them is in control. Since none has ultimate authority, the future is no less opaque to them than it is to us. None of the gods can even know whether he will live or die. The world may be less of a mystery to the gods than it is to us, but it is a mystery nonetheless. When the gods themselves are struggling to be personal and cannot see the future or the meaning of it all, they cannot be the source of personal meaning for man.

Through the contrast with a mere theism and polytheism, we have a better idea what it means to say that only in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is there a personal absolute. In the Father, Son, and Spirit, Christians worship three equally ultimate Persons who are united in one Being. Neither God's oneness nor His threeness is prior to the other. Both His personal unity and His personal diversity are ultimate. Human beings—created in God's image as persons—have meaning, both individually and as a race, because they are the image of the Absolute. Indeed, the whole creation can only be understood rightly in terms of the tri-personal God who created all things to reveal His glory. Ultimate explanation is not to be found in principles, nor in ideas, nor in a "final theory" made up of accidents and laws blended in mystery, but in the Father, Son, and Spirit—the Personal God. All things in the world are what they are by His will—they were created by Him and for Him, and in Him alone they subsist (Col. 1:16–17). The history of the world unfolds according to the plan of Him "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11b).

This means that Christians *must* question the meaning and purpose of events. They cannot escape the question "why," nor answer it with "that's just the way things are."<sup>5</sup> In the trinitarian worldview, the most trivial events have a significance that is tied to the most profound reality—"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father" (Mt. 10:29). Even things about ourselves too minor for us to notice are not ignored by the Father: "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Mt. 10:30). Whereas the modern, impersonal worldview of scientific rationalism leads to an "unbearable lightness of

<sup>5</sup> Some complain that the answer "It is God's will" amounts to the same thing, but the objection is grounded in a failure to observe the immeasurable gap between the personal will of the heavenly Father and an impersonal "way" that "things are."

being,”<sup>6</sup> the Christian worldview teaches us to see, in the love and care of our heavenly Father, the perfect though inscrutable plan of the Creator who controls all things.

It is clear also that faith in a trinitarian God means that man himself becomes truly personal. In Carl F. H. Henry’s words, “More than any other factor in the history of Western thought it is this doctrine of the Trinity that has riveted attention on the fact and nature and importance of human personality.”<sup>7</sup> If man is God’s image, then the answer to the question of God’s nature gives insight into the question of man’s nature. Trinitarianism shows us that God is a God in whom three Persons share an eternal fellowship of love. We can even say they are who they are because of that fellowship of love, for the Father cannot be the Father without the Son, and the Father and the Son are not related without the Spirit. Man, who is the image of this God who exists in personal relation, is therefore a creature in relation. First and most fundamentally, man exists in relationship with God. Then, no less necessarily, man exists and grows as a person in relationship with other human persons.

## The One and the Many

Problems in the philosophical theory of knowledge and the philosophical theory of reality are mutually involved. Our definition of reality, in other words, is going to determine the methods and meaning of knowledge and vice versa. For example, if one posits ultimate reality as unknowable, then his theory of knowledge must be limited to the knowledge of penultimate reality, with the qualification that he will never be able to know how much

**The problem of unity and diversity, in various forms, became the center of Greek speculation.**

or in what ways penultimate reality is influenced by ultimate reality. This, of course, radically qualifies the knowledge of

penultimate reality. If, on the other hand, one claims that knowledge of the universe can be obtained only by logical deduction from basic axioms, then one’s view of the world will be limited to ideas and things within the scope of a deductive system, eliminating vast areas of human experience.

<sup>6</sup> I am borrowing the title of the book, not referring to its message.

<sup>7</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:150.



Thus, in any consistent worldview, the theory of knowledge and the theory of reality will be coherently related parts of a systematic whole. This helps us think about the implications of trinitarianism. The Trinity is the ultimate reality in the Christian worldview, and all other aspects of the Christian worldview find their origin in the one true God. Our view of knowledge, too, must be systematically related to our view of reality, which is to say, an ultimately personal view of reality naturally leads to a personal view of knowledge.

As men have tried to come to grips with the basic issues of reality and knowledge, they have confronted difficult problems in each of these branches of philosophy—the theories of knowledge and reality. These problems seem to arise from the very nature of man and the world in which he lives, so that every religion and philosophy is forced to suggest some sort of answer to these basic issues. Christianity not only has its own distinct answers to the problems, it also has a different perspective on the nature of the problems themselves. For the Christian, “problems” for human thought that arise from the very nature of the world are actually fingerprints of the triune God. This is most evident in the case of the key philosophical conundrum,<sup>8</sup> the rock that has crushed philosophical and religious systems throughout the history of man—the problem of the One and the Many.

It is an ancient problem. Writing in the third century after Christ, Diogenes Laertius, the ancient historian of philosophy, identified Musaeus as the first man to set forth what might be called a philosophy. Musaeus was said to have believed “that all things proceed from unity and are resolved into unity.”<sup>9</sup> From his (rather mythical) time forward, the problem of unity and diversity, in various forms, became the center of Greek speculation. Two fundamentally opposite views were proposed.

Heraclitus . . . held that all things flow, that becoming is the only reality. This river you look at, he said, and give a single name to, is never for an instant the same river. Parmenides held almost the polar opposite of this

<sup>8</sup> “[P]hilosophy seeks above all for a solution to the problem of the one and the many, which is presented moreover under various forms . . .” Louis De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being: A Synthesis of Metaphysics* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1954), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas and Movements*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1:19.

Heraclitan doctrine of flux; for Parmenides, change is an illusion, reality one great whole, perfect and indivisible.<sup>10</sup>

Given the underlying presupposition of Greek philosophy—the autonomy of human thought<sup>11</sup>—the problem of the One and the Many cannot be rationally solved. A little reflection makes this abundantly plain. If the One is ultimate, then all the diversity in the world has no final meaning. If, as Musaeus supposedly said, all things come out of and return to the One, then the Many are merely temporary. They have meaning and existence only in the One and through the One. Their impermanent and penultimate existence can have no definitive meaning. Real, lasting, and ultimate meaning belongs only to the One from which and to which all flows, in which all is resolved. The philosophy of Parmenides, who asserted the ultimacy of the One, leaves us with the mystery of an incomprehensible One and a meaningless Many.

We will not find real help, however, in the opposite doctrine of Heraclitus. For if we posit the Many as ultimate in order to find meaning, we actually end up with the same problem in a different form. Now meaning becomes impossible because there is no unity in the world. Every thing that exists is isolated from every other thing. In Heraclitus' view, each member of the Many is its own ultimate principle and cannot be related to any other member in terms of language or principles that include both members, for any method of relating two of the Many would imply a unity above them. It would destroy the ultimacy of the Many. The result is that explanation and meaning are impossible.

The problem of the One and the Many is difficult to follow, so providing some illustrations may help to clarify the main point—which is that either conceiving of the One as ultimate, like Parmenides did, or conceiving of the Many as ultimate, as Heraclitus did, results in absurdity.

Stating the problem of the One and the Many in concrete terms as a problem of language may open up a perspective that will shed additional

<sup>10</sup> Crain Brinton, *Ideas and Men: The Story of Western Thought* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 39.

<sup>11</sup> By this expression, I mean the idea that there is no intellectual authority above man, that human reason is a law to itself. To the Greeks, man's mind was the highest source of rational explanation in the world and the ultimate judge of what is rational or not rational, true or false.



light on the subject and facilitate our understanding. Consider, for our illustration, each individual word in the dictionary to be a member of the many. If we posit the One as ultimate, the result would be that the individual words of the dictionary would lose their distinct meaning, for the meaning of each word would be tied up with and reducible to the One. To paraphrase Musaeus, each word proceeds from the One and is resolved into the One. In effect, then, the individual words would simply be different ways of pronouncing the One. The whole dictionary would be absorbed into one single word whose meaning would be rationally incomprehensible because it would include everything, including all the opposites of the world. Good is the One. Evil is the One. Right and left, up and down, backwards and forwards, all are the One. Hatred and love could not be ultimately distinguished. For that matter, hatred and bananas could not be ultimately distinguished. When every aspect of reality blends into a universal blob, meaning disappears.

On the other hand, the ultimacy of the Many would mean that each word in the dictionary must be known by itself, without explanation in terms of the other words. If each word were ultimate, explanation in terms of higher categories or principles would be excluded, because nothing could exist above the individual words to bring them into relation. And since every member of the Many would be ultimate to itself, we would end up with a dictionary that could at best be nothing more than a list of words. With the fragmentation of the world into unrelatable and indefinable units, we would face the disintegration of meaning no less certainly than we would when we assert the ultimacy of the One.

Another illustration of the problem of the One and the Many comes from politics. In this case, the ultimacy of the One would mean the ultimacy of the state—statism. In the statist view, the individual is nothing more than a piece of the larger mechanism. When the state is conceived as being ultimate, then the individuals in the society would decide—or have decided for them—their jobs, their marriages, and the affairs of daily life in terms of the needs or demands of the state. In the end, only the state would count.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This is not, by the way, merely a theoretical matter. In the twentieth century both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin held views that amounted to positing the ultimacy of the state over the individual. Hitler's view was national socialism. Stalin's was international socialism. But



On the other hand, the ultimacy of the Many in politics means anarchy. Each individual man would be his own law, his own ultimate authority. Family, state, church, and other groups would have no authority or real significance. It could hardly be said that they would even exist, for every group would be nothing more than an accidental, temporary conglomeration. Groups would only appear to be a whole. In reality, they would be a mere amassment of individual, unrelated, and unrelatable fragments.

Whether we think, therefore, of the ultimacy of the One or of the Many, political philosophy is reduced to absurdity. Statism and anarchy both undermine the meaning of the state itself as well as the individual citizen. For neither an undifferentiated mass nor a host of isolated particles is capable of being rationally analyzed or structured. As we saw also from the illustration from language, the problem of the One and the Many in politics illustrates that what we need is a philosophy of life that allows for *both* the One and the Many to have ultimate meaning.

We should add that the historical tendency is toward believing in the ultimacy of the One.<sup>13</sup> Pantheistic religions teach the ultimacy of the One. The religions that believe in a monad—Judaism and Islam—believe in the ultimacy of the One. Even polytheism, as we observed, tends to find a One—fate, chance, or some other principle—that exists above the gods and functions as an ultimate principle. It seems that most men have chosen to hold to the ultimacy of the One over that of the Many.

This does not mean that all philosophers bounce back and forth between Heraclitus and Parmenides. On the contrary, schizophrenic attempts to bring the One and Many together are the norm. For societies to function, finding some means of relating the One and the Many to each other is necessary from a practical standpoint. Societies stumble along, trying to work things out. But inability to come to terms with the problem of the

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both of them were totalitarian collectivists. It may be noted in passing that regarding Hitler as the “right” and Stalin as the “left” is not a very helpful approach, for both of them are on the same side of the spectrum, regarding the One as ultimate.

<sup>13</sup> This is particularly true in China and the Orient, where, for example, the teaching of Taoism is summed up by Wing-Tsit Chan thus: “Whereas in other schools Tao means a system or moral truth, in this school [Taoism] it is the One, which is natural, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, and indescribable. It is at once the beginning of all things and the way in which all things pursue their course.” *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), 136.

One and the Many has been a source of social disruption throughout history, and it remains today an unsolved and unsolvable dilemma for would-be autonomous thought. Of course, this does not mean that people just give up. Societies may fluctuate, but most people conduct their lives as if they know an ultimate harmony between the One and the Many does exist. Indeed, they naturally seek that harmony. But in non-Christian philosophy, men do not find either a solution to their basic metaphysical dilemma or an ultimate explanation for the moral, scientific, or rational principles they continue to believe in.<sup>14</sup>

Though the Bible never deals with the problem of the One and the Many as an abstract philosophical problem, and Christians are never given “principles” to enable them to discover the harmony of the One and the Many in their daily lives, the Christian answer to the problem is obvious. The doctrine of the Trinity provides an apprehensible, if not incomprehensible, solution in the equal ultimacy of the One and the Many in God. The solution to man’s dilemma is personal—God Himself. Because He is One, there is unity in Him and in His creation. But He is also Three. Multiplicity, therefore, also has final meaning in God Himself and in His creation. We know this only because the Bible reveals it. Even so, we cannot fathom the depths of the Trinity. We cannot analyze, dissect, or systematically unfold the whole truth of the absolute God, demonstrating all the relations of the One and the Many in a humanly comprehensible and rational system. God remains, in other words, incomprehensible. However, we can see that He is the solution to the problem, and knowing that enables us to find intellectual and spiritual rest through faith in Him.

**The doctrine of the Trinity provides an apprehensible solution in the equal ultimacy of the One and the Many in God.**

<sup>14</sup> Although not dealing specifically with the One and the Many, Stanley Jaki demonstrates the futility of non-Christian thought through an in-depth survey of ancient paganism. Jaki shows that the biblical doctrine of creation opened the way to a rational view of the universe and the birth of modern science. Another book about the ancient world, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, shows that the fall of Rome was related to her inability to come to workable solutions to the problem of the One and the Many. See Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986) and Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).



Perhaps even more noteworthy is that we can see that the triune God is the *source* of the “problem.” If the world had been created by a monad, the problem of the One and the Many would not exist, for the resolution of all into the One ought to be at least apparently possible. The nature of the world would reflect the nature of its creator; however, the world is much more complex than, and very different from, the one a monad would or could create. If we think about the fact that we live in a world that demands some type of harmony between the One and the Many, we cannot help but ask the question, Why is the world like this? The Christian has an answer. We confront the mystery of the One and the Many because the world was created by the God who is One and Many. The problem is a pointer to the nature of ultimate reality. The very fact of the problem of the One and the Many is a testimony to the Trinity.

If a non-Christian, imitating the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, proposed a solution to the problem of the One and the Many in the equal ultimacy of an impersonal One and Many, he would still not be able to explain our world. The impersonal hardly serves as a source for the personal. Nor is there a reason why man should exist so clearly as the lord of this planet in a world that evolved from an impersonal One and Many. If the non-Christian proposed a *personal* One and Many, he would still be merely borrowing from Christianity without the benefit of revelation. As we said before, Christians do not believe in the Trinity because they seek solutions to philosophical problems. They believe in the Trinity because the knowledge of Jesus Christ compels them to confess Him as God and to believe His witness concerning the Father and the Spirit. The “solution” to the “problem” is in a personal relationship with the One God, something that cannot be created through philosophical speculation or religious pontification. Only Christ Himself, present to us through the Holy Spirit, makes the truth of the Trinity apparent. The philosophical implications of the doctrine come later.

Another aspect of the problem remains, however. If we cannot really expound the harmony of the One and the Many in the being of God, how can we realize the harmony of the One and the Many in our daily lives? The answer, again, is found in God’s revelation. He has given us in His Word commandments that are to be a light to our path and a lamp for our feet (Ps. 119:105). If we follow His commandments, we will be walking in love, for



the commands to love God and our neighbor are the essence of the whole law (Mt. 22:37–40). By obedience to the commandments of God, we can discover—to the degree it is possible in a world of sin—harmony in family, church, and state. Note that the harmony of everyday life is not something we can attain through speculation, nor is it primarily an intellectual issue. To worship the true God in faith and love and to live in obedience to His revealed will is the key to the practical issues we face. The realization of the Christian solution to the problem of the One and the Many, in other words, is ethical. In the Christian position, man's whole being is addressed, so that obedience and worship are inseparable from knowledge. Just as the ultimate intellectual solution to the problem of the One and the Many is not attainable by mere speculation, so also it is only in Scripture that we find the solutions to the practical problems posed by the unity and diversity of the world and human life.

## Conclusion

The ultimate reality of a personal God demands a doctrine of knowledge grounded in personal revelation. The triune God is the source of and ultimate answer for the philosophical problem of the One and the Many—a problem that, from a different perspective, brings us back to the necessity of personal revelation. By the powers of philosophical speculation alone we cannot attain either theoretical or practical knowledge of the harmony of the One and the Many. We need instruction from the One who is also the Many, the God who is not an abstract principle but a personal Three united in a personal One. The mind-staggering complexity of the world testifies to the wonder of the Maker and calls us to worship Him. Knowledge of the world depends upon the unfathomable integration of the One and the Many, a task far beyond our ability. The Father must teach us and show us, the Son must be with us, and the Spirit must be in us before we can make sense of the world and find rest for our minds and souls.

## Review Questions

1. Explain why a monad like Allah is not truly personal.
2. Explain why the gods of polytheism are not truly personal.
3. Explain why the triune God is truly personal.
4. Why is the personhood of God important?
5. What is the problem of the One and the Many?
6. Give two illustrations of the problem of the One and the Many.
7. Why does the problem of the One and the Many occur?
8. How do we obtain a practical harmony of the One and the Many in our lives?

### 3. The Covenantal God

WE HAVE discussed the basics of the doctrine of the Trinity and some of its worldview implications. We are ready now to return to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity and consider two aspects that are less emphasized—perhaps even completely overlooked—but which are profoundly important for the Christian worldview. These two truths represent a more sophisticated level of trinitarianism but nothing arcane or obscure, even if the technical vocabulary may initially seem somewhat intimidating.

First, we will take time to consider the truth that *what God does in history reveals who He is in eternity*.<sup>1</sup> In part, this is a simple deduction from the fact that God cannot change. He is self-consistent. More importantly, this principle expresses the basic biblical idea of revelation, which we will explore in more depth in a later chapter. In the creation of the world and through His

<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck expressed it in technical theological language when he wrote, “Now these inter-personal relations existing within the divine essence are also revealed outwardly. To be sure, outgoing works always pertain to the Divine Being as a whole. ‘God’s outgoing works are indivisible although the order and distinction of the persons is preserved.’ One and the same God reveals himself in creation and redemption. But in this unity the order of subsistence within the divine essence is preserved. The ontological trinity is reflected in the economical trinity. Hence, certain attributes and works are ascribed particularly—though not exclusively, as was held by Abelard—to one person, others especially to another, in such a manner that the order of subsistence pertaining to the ontological trinity is revealed in this outward manifestation.” *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 317–18. Bavinck’s work was first published in Dutch near the end of the nineteenth century.



leading in history, God is manifesting Himself. He does not hide from us but shines the light of His glory so that we can seek and know Him. Men fail to see Him not because He is far off but because sinful man willfully shuts his eyes to the light.

Second, we will look into the implications of an ancient theological word—*perichoresis* in Greek, *circumincessio* in Latin—that points to an important aspect of the Trinity. The theological terms are technical, but the truth expressed is straightforward: each of the Persons of the Trinity dwells in the others. This comes to expression most frequently in the Gospel of John, where our Lord repeatedly says that He is “in the Father” and the Father is “in” Him.

## God Shows Himself

It is not simply that whatever God does must, in the nature of the case, reveal something about who He is. As we shall see in a later chapter, He reveals Himself because revelation is an essential aspect of His trinitarian nature. The triune God shows Himself to us because He delights to have us draw near to Him in a real personal relationship. In the beginning, before the Fall, this was evident in the fact that God placed Adam in a garden-sanctuary to dwell with Him. After the Fall, it meant that God’s self-revelation was redemptive. God’s works in the world

**The most frequently employed biblical device for structuring history is the covenant.**

and in history abundantly manifest His nature, and His self-revelation in Scripture expounds His works so that we can clearly see what He is saying to us. Though there are depths to what He shows us about Himself that may be difficult to reach, most of what He reveals of Himself is plain enough to be understood even by children. Paradoxically, because this perspicuous revelation is totally personal, it is also hidden from those who hate Him (Mt. 13:11–17).

The incomprehensible depth and transparent clarity of God’s self-revelation are united in the revelation that He has given to us in His Son.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:14, 18)

Is there a biblical word that sums up God's self-revelation in history? No doubt there is more than one perspective from which to view the subject, but the most frequently employed biblical device for structuring history is the *covenant*. From the Garden of Eden to the end of the world, God establishes covenants that define His relationship with man, and He never relates to man apart from a covenant. This raises a question about God Himself: Do these covenants reveal God's nature? The answer to that question is given, in part, in the fact that the relationship between the Father and the Son embraces all the elements of the biblical idea of covenant and reveals most deeply its meaning.

## The Elements of a Covenant

Though God reveals Himself in all of His works throughout history, it is appropriate to begin with His glorious manifestation of Himself in Christ, for only in the light of the knowledge of Christ can we grasp, for what it truly is, everything else God has done in history. Jesus is the center of our calendar because He is the center of all. In the Bible the centrality of Christ is seen in the fact that the entire Old Testament era is spent waiting for the coming of the Messiah, with the prophets declaring various aspects of His saving work and proclaiming the glories of His reign and the histories foreshadowing His person and work. From the fall of Adam onward, the whole of biblical revelation is focused on the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).

So many detailed prophecies were fulfilled in the life of Christ that we cannot doubt that God has a plan for history and that Jesus is the center of that plan. We may note in passing that biblical prophecy demonstrates God's control over world history. We see this both in grand prophetic visions of the future and in predictions of specific events. No other religion or worldview, for example, offers anything like the biblical book of Daniel and its prediction of the rise and fall of the Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman empires (Dan. 2:36–45). But prophecy in general and Daniel in particular is not about politics or amazing stories of the future. The empires Daniel predicted were part of God's program to prepare the world for the Messiah. The worldly principalities and powers existed for Him and His purposes. Even the small details of biblical prophecy manifest God's working in the world. Roman soldiers gambled over the Messiah's



clothing, unconsciously fulfilling Scripture that had been written hundreds of years before (Jn. 19:24). Both the great and small of prophecy come together when Peter rebukes the Jews for crucifying Jesus: “Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death” (Acts 2:23). God’s Lordship is evident in the rise and fall of the empires, as well as in the perversity of the soldiers and the hardheartedness of His own people. But even though God directs the affairs of men, Peter reminds us that we are accountable and responsible for all we do.

When we carefully consider the revelation that God has given us in His Son, it becomes clear that one of the overarching themes of the Old Testament is the idea of covenant. The covenant theme structures the form and content of the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi and finds its unique fulfillment in Jesus. The Gospel writers do not explicitly emphasize the covenant idea. Instead they use language that presupposes it and they set forth the basic elements that are familiar from the Old Testament. The following summary of the covenant between the Son and the Father is one way to outline the elements of a covenant.

### *1. Lordship*

God’s total plan for history focuses on the Messiah and is seen most clearly in Him. In the Messiah we learn about God Himself. Throughout the Bible, but especially in the Psalms, God is extolled as Lord and King. His transcendent glory and power are such that all the nations of the world are like a drop in a bucket or dust on scales (Is. 40:15). When they rage in rebellion, He laughs (Ps. 2:4). As the greatest king of the ancient world confessed,

I blessed the most High, and I praised and honored him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? (Dan. 4:34–35)

### *2. Hierarchy*

When we consider the gospel accounts, especially the Gospel of John, another aspect of God’s self-revelation through the incarnation of Christ be-



comes clear. One of the most frequently repeated themes in the Gospels is that the Father sent the Son into the world (Mt. 10:40; 15:24; Mk. 9:37; Lk. 4:43; 9:48; 10:16; Jn. 3:17; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36, 37; 6:29, 38, 39, 40; 7:16, 18; and others). This fact has a number of significant implications, but one of the most simple and obvious is that there is a hierarchy within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son. The Son submits to the Father's will. In the words of Jesus, "And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him" (Jn. 8:29). Of course, the very name *Father* and *Son* imply the hierarchical relationship, expressed so frequently in the Gospels as Jesus' obedience to the Father and His seeking the Father's honor and glory. Though it is not emphasized, the same relationship can be seen between the Spirit and the Son, for the Son, together with the Father, sends the Spirit, and the Spirit glorifies the Son (Jn. 15:26; 16:7, 14).

Hierarchy in relationship means that the Father is greater than the Son in His *office* only, not in His *being*. The Father sends the Son, but the Son does not send the Father. The Father and the Son send the Spirit, but the Spirit does not send the Father and the Son. The official hierarchy of the Persons is their eternal relationship. It does not imply that the Son is less powerful or that He does not fully share the omniscience of the Father. On the contrary, the Son and the Holy Spirit possess all the attributes of God to the same infinite degree as the Father. The Persons of the Trinity are equal in their being but different in their personhood, existing in a hierarchy of Father, Son, and Spirit.

### 3. *Commandments and Obedience*

The hierarchical relationships in the Trinity come to concrete expression in the form of commandments, a central feature of the covenants in the Old Testament. The Father has commanded the Son what to do (Jn. 5:36; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37) and what to speak (Jn. 12:49; 17:8). The Son's obedience to the Father is therefore comprehensive. Not only was every miracle done according to the Father's plan and direction, even seemingly unimportant events are included. When Jesus stopped by the roadside to speak with the Samaritan woman, He explained to His surprised disciples: "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (Jn. 4:34).

#### 4. *Blessing*

The Father sent the Son to do the work He had planned before the foundation of the world, and the Son, in full and perfect obedience to the Father, fulfilled that work. We are not surprised therefore when we read the prayer our Lord prayed before His betrayal, which shows that He knew the Father would accept His work and reward it. Jesus spoke of the Father glorifying the Son (Jn. 17:1, 5) but even more of the fact that the Church, the people for whom Jesus died, would be the gift of the Father to the Son (Jn. 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24). Just as Jesus' obedience to the Father was the expression of holy love, so also the Father's reward to the Son was the expression of His perfect delight in the Son and His acceptance of the work of redemption.

**The elements of the covenant in the structure of Deuteronomy are fundamental worldview categories.**

#### 5. *Succession*

Jesus' sacrifice was perfect and He pronounced His work of substitutionary suffering finished (Jn. 19:30), but there was other work that He did not finish. He passed it on to His disciples in the same way that God, in the beginning when He created the world, left the dominion project unfinished so that man as His coworker could complete the task. Therefore, the Son said to His disciples: "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (Jn. 20:21). In the book of Acts, we see His apostles performing works similar to those of Jesus and also suffering at the hands of God's enemies, even unto death. They inherited His work and, in turn, passed it on to others after them. And so it has continued all the way to our own day.

What we have summarized here about the relationship between the incarnate Son and the Father follows the same outline that structures the book of Deuteronomy as it defines the covenant relationship between God and His people. (1) *Lordship*: God is the covenant Lord who grants the covenant (Deut. 1:1–8). (2) *Hierarchy*: He directs His people through leaders that He has appointed to represent Him (Deut. 1:9–4:43). (3) *Commandments*: He gives commandments for both the leaders and the people (Deut. 4:44–26:19). (4) *Sanctions*: If the people are faithful, they will be blessed, but if they reject His goodness and love, they bring upon themselves a curse (Deut. 27–30). (5)



*Succession:* God's prophet, Moses, passes on the work of the covenant to his successor, Joshua, and to the next generation of Israel (Deut. 31–32).

The elements of the covenant in the structure of Deuteronomy are fundamental worldview categories, though they may be stated in different terms and the individual elements themselves may be expressed in broader or narrower terms. When modern scholars of comparative religion, for example, consider the history of religion and attempt to describe the data, they develop a remarkably similar account of the elements of a worldview. William E. Paden, in his popular textbook on comparative religion, sees all religions as including something about gods, myth (stories of the relationship of men and the gods), systems of purity (rules), and ritual and time (methods of affirming blessing and curse).<sup>3</sup> To restate the covenant outline in the more general terms of worldview: (1) All worldviews involve some notion of ultimacy. (2) The ultimate being or power must come into concrete contact with the world through a representative of some kind. (3) Every worldview has its own view of right and wrong and commands obedience to the ultimate and penultimate authorities. (4) Law without sanction cannot stand, in any worldview, at any time. Blessings and curses are always included and the ceremonial aspect of religion focuses upon them. (5) Every worldview has some view of the goal of history and some method for one generation to pass on its work to the next. We should add that worldviews are not taught through five-point outlines; they are passed on from one generation to the next in stories and the ceremonies, celebrations, and customs that are based upon those stories.

## The Essence of a Covenant

Since all men are created in God's image, the fact that non-Christian religions and worldviews have ideas that are similar to the biblical covenantal idea, especially in their political and socio-cultural religious systems, provokes no surprise. However, though every religion and worldview contains

<sup>3</sup> William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*, second ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). I have changed the order of Paden's topics in order to make the parallel with the biblical covenantal structure apparent. Ninian Smart's analysis also fits the biblical covenant structure with only slight adjustments. Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).



the elements of a covenant, the biblical worldview contrasts sharply with non-Christian worldviews. In the Bible, the covenant idea is first of all a *theological* idea, not a political or religious one. The covenant is a revelation of the very life of the triune God. The differences become especially clear when we consider the essence of the covenant relationship.

What is the essence of the biblical idea of covenant? The answer often given is misleading, though not wholly false. A common definition of *covenant* is “agreement” since the Bible uses the word *covenant* to describe various agreements made by men. But this sense of the word is altogether inadequate to express what the word means when the Bible speaks of God and His covenant with man, or when it speaks of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. The trinitarian covenant is not a mere agreement among the three Persons. Covenant means *relationship*, and the essence of the covenant relationship is *love*.

To understand the nature of a covenant, the most helpful and meaningful biblical example is the marriage relationship. Marriage is an “agreement,” but it is a very special kind of agreement. Marriage, unlike contractual agreements, is entered into with an oath. The marriage oath expresses beautifully what a covenant really is, a promise to love and cherish one another until death. The oath expresses total commitment, a self-sacrificial giving of oneself in love. There is no “escape” clause if one party decides he is not getting what he wanted from the agreement. The words “until death” suggest that as far as life in this world time limit. Though the marriage covenant can be broken and dissolved, it is still not really accurate to call it a “conditional” covenant, for the promises of the marriage oath do not really constitute conditions. Human marriage at best, however, is only a faint image of God’s covenant. God’s covenant love for His people reflects something much deeper and more wonderful: the eternal self-denying love that each of the Persons of the Trinity has for the others.

This is the love that God expressed to His people Israel through the gift of the covenant.

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples

on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:6–8)

Since God chose Israel and gave Himself to her in love, the one thing He demanded was the covenant response of love.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:5)

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? (Deut. 10:12–13)

Though it is clear from these verses that the essence of God's covenant relationship with Israel was love, everyone who knows the Bible is aware that the idea of covenant, especially the covenant given through Moses, is also associated with law and righteousness. Indeed, the expression "Law of Moses" is virtually equivalent to the expression "Mosaic covenant." Should we think of the Mosaic covenant primarily as law<sup>4</sup> or primarily as love? Although to some, there seems to be a great difference between the notion of covenant as a relationship of love and covenant as a relationship of law, this is actually a false dichotomy. Once again, marriage provides an appropriate analogy. Marriage is a legal relationship with binding rules and mutual obligations publicly expressed and legally ratified. This does not suggest to anyone that marriage is *primarily* or *merely* a legal relationship. It does not occur to us to think that somehow the legal aspect of the bond *interferes* with the relational

<sup>4</sup> A further complication is the fact that the Hebrew word translated "law" (*torah*) means "instruction" rather than "law" or "principle." The Law of Moses is the instruction that God gave to Israel through Moses. It certainly is a "legally binding" instruction and therefore "law" or "covenant." But the word "law" alone is too often understood as if we had a bare command rather than the loving instruction of our Father. Biblical law is never merely "rules" imposed by authority.



aspect.<sup>5</sup> Obviously the legal bond is a seal of the love relationship, making it more solemn and exalting rather than detracting from it.

In the same way, God's relationship with Israel is both a relationship of law and a relationship of love. Israel is a nation and God is her king. To give her a righteous and wise law is an act of love on the part of the heavenly king, who regards Israel not as political subjects but as His dear children (Deut. 14:1). He in turn is their heavenly Father. Remember that the Lord instructed Moses, "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the LORD: Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exod. 4:22). We miss the biblical view of God if we do not see His kingship and fatherhood together, just as we miss the biblical view of covenant if we think of law as political rather than as loving instruction. Both elements are involved in the Mosaic covenant, but as we see from Deuteronomy 10:12–13, the legal and political never take precedence over the personal.

Some have suggested that the essence of the covenant changes from law in the Old Testament to love in the New Testament. Certainly there is growth in covenantal revelation; the New Covenant era emphasizes love and the inward knowledge of the will of God more than the Old Covenant. But the inseparable relationship between law and love is manifest in the New Testament no less than in the Old, since the New Testament itself points back to

**Love and righteousness are two different and mutually defining perspectives on a right relationship.**

the Old Testament as the model for covenant understanding. For example, Jesus alludes to God's relationship with Israel and the love of the covenant when He instructs His disciples to "abide" in Him (Jn. 15:1–16). He

refers to Himself as the Vine, a symbol of Israel and her covenant relationship with God (Ps. 80; Is. 5; etc.). Even more important, in John 15 Jesus clearly indicates that our covenant relationship to Him is parallel to His covenant relationship with the Father. The same law-love relationship that characterizes the Old Testament defines the relationship among the Three Persons of the Trinity and as our relationship to God as well.

<sup>5</sup> Imagine the young woman who would say, "If you really loved me, you would not swear before God and men to be faithful to me for the rest of your life, to love and cherish me. You would not share your property with me and take care of my physical needs and those of our children. If you really loved me, you would not harness me with that ring, your money, and a house. If you love me, emote! Forget this legal stuff!"



As the Father loved Me, I also 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. (Jn. 15:9–10)

Undoubtedly Jesus kept the Father's commandments because He loved the Father. Their relationship has a definite structure. The Father is the First Person. The Son, though equal in being, is under the Father's authority. But this is not a political or legal relationship in the sense of a relationship determined by naked law and rigid rules imposed from above, nor do the commands represent what we would call "conditions." The Father commands the Son because He loves Him. Just as God said to Israel that His commandments were for their good—an expression of His fatherly love—so also the Father expresses fatherly love by instructing the Son. The Son's obedience is His response of love.

Keeping commandments in the covenant falls into the categories of law and righteousness, of course. But in the biblical covenant, the notion of binding obligation in law is never separated from the personal care and love of family relationship. Love and righteousness are two different and mutually defining perspectives on a right relationship. They emphasize different aspects, but neither is meaningful without the other. A love that flagrantly breaks the commandments of God would not be love any more than a righteousness that is cold, superficial conformity would be real righteousness.

## Conclusion

The elements that define a covenant all appear in the Gospels' depiction of the relationship between the Son and the Father, indicating that the biblical doctrine of the covenant finds its roots in the doctrine of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another in a structured and hierarchical relationship, but the essence of that relationship is love. Because God is the God of the covenant, man, God's image, thinks in covenantal terms. The elements of the covenant come to expression in human psychology, religion, and society, for they have been imprinted into the circuits of man's covenantal being. The Bible differs so much from non-Christian worldviews and religions because in the Bible the elements of the covenant converge in the trinitarian God in the eternal commitment of covenantal love.

## Perichoresis

*Perichoresis* is a difficult word that expresses a deep truth. Like all truth about God, it transcends our grasp, though its meaning can be simply stated. The word *perichoresis* refers to the fact that Father, Son, and Spirit mutually *indwell* one another. This theme appears quite explicitly in the Gospel of John, but to appreciate the full meaning of the notion of indwelling, we have to consider the history of God's self-revelation. When biblical writers speak of being "in" someone or something, they employ the analogy of physical space to convey the intimacy of covenant union. This concept is important for the Christian worldview in many respects, but particularly because it shows from a different perspective what it means to say that the Christian God is a covenantal God and that the Christian worldview is a covenantal worldview.

### The Son in the Father

We are familiar with the frequent expressions in the Gospel of John that speak of the mutual "in-ness" of the persons of the Trinity. In the introduction to the Gospel, for example, we are told that Jesus is able to "declare" the Father because He is in the bosom of the Father (Jn. 1:18). Jesus Himself speaks most often of this relationship. When He sought to persuade the Jews to believe in Him, He said, "If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him" (Jn. 10:37–38). Interestingly, He uses essentially the same sort of reasoning when speaking to His disciples on the night of His betrayal. Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus' answer pointed to the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Godhead.

**Perichoresis refers to the fact that Father, Son, and Spirit mutually indwell one another.**

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me



that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. (Jn. 14:9–11)

So full and perfect is the mutual indwelling of Jesus and the Father that to see Jesus is to see the Father. Every word that Jesus speaks and every deed that He performs are no less the word or deed of the Father than they are the word or deed of the Son. This was a notion hard for the disciples to grasp, but Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit came, they would understand: “At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (Jn. 14:20).

What does it mean for the Father and the Son to “dwell” in one another? Is God a different class of being, in which persons can entirely interpenetrate one another, something not conceivable in human relationships? No doubt we are confronted here with the mystery of God’s being and the fact that three Persons are one God. The Persons of the Trinity are not separate from each other even though they are distinguishable. Though they are three distinct Persons, yet they are so fully and absolutely united that they are also one God. The language of mutual indwelling expresses these unfathomable truths.

Another essential aspect of this language is that indwelling is also a metaphor for covenantal relationship. Again, it is Jesus Himself who points us in this direction. When He prayed for His Church, He prayed for unity, in language that linked unity possible in human relationships to the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity.

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. (Jn. 17:20–23)

That Jesus is speaking of a covenantal relationship is clear from the fact that unity, love, and indwelling are linked here in the same way that obedience to God’s commands, love, and indwelling are linked in John 15. It is also apparent that for human persons to interpenetrate one another



ontologically is not even remotely conceivable. What Jesus is speaking of is the intimacy of the covenant, the essence of which is love.

## God with Us and in Us

What I pointed out about the covenantal meaning of John 17, both as it applies to the Trinity and as it applies to the relationship of God's people, reflects the covenantal development of biblical history and the symbolism of the covenant in the Old Testament. Both of these, in turn, find their fulfillment in one of the most well-known realities of the New Covenant: the indwelling of the Spirit in the Church.

To see how this development unfolds, we must return to the Garden of Eden. Eden is where God placed man in order that they might enjoy intimate covenant fellowship. It was the place where God would dwell with man (Gen. 2:8). The Garden was the sanctuary, both the spiritual and physical center of the original world. This is alluded to in the later design of the tabernacle and temple, both of which through Edenic symbolism pointed back to the Garden as the true sanctuary of God. In contrast to Eden, however, man is on the *outside* of the tabernacle and temple. He is not permitted to enter the Most Holy Place, the sanctuary of Eden, because of his sins. Nevertheless, by grace, God dwelt with Israel and blessed her on the basis of the atoning work of the Messiah who was to come.

One of the most frequently repeated expressions in the Bible points to God's covenant love for His people. The covenant formula, "God with us," appears in various forms throughout the Old Testament as an expression of God's covenantal presence and blessing.<sup>6</sup> It finds its highest expression as a name for the Messiah, "Immanuel," which Matthew translates, "God with us" (Mt. 1:23). Jesus alluded to the covenant formula and promised that the blessing of the covenant would be intensified in the New Covenant era

<sup>6</sup> See Gen. 26:3, 24, 28; 28:15, 20; 31:3; 39:2, 3, 21, 23; 48:21; Exod. 3:12; 10:10; 18:19; 20:20; Num. 14:9; 16:3; 23:21; Deut. 32:12; Josh. 1:5, 9, 17; 3:7; 6:27; 22:31; Judg. 1:19, 22; 6:12, 13, 16; Ruth 2:4; 1 Sam. 3:19; 10:7; 14:7; 16:18; 17:37; 18:12, 14, 28; 20:13; 2 Sam. 7:3; 14:17; 1 Kgs. 1:37; 8:57; 11:38; 2 Kgs. 3:12; 10:15; 18:7; 1 Chr. 9:20; 17:2; 22:11, 16; 28:20; 2 Chr. 1:1; 13:12; 15:2, 9; 17:3; 19:11; 20:17; 36:23; Ezra 1:3; Ps. 118:6, 7; Is. 8:10; 41:10; 43:2, 5; 45:14; Jer. 1:8, 19; 15:20; 20:11; 30:11; 42:11; 46:28; Zeph. 3:17; Hag. 1:13; 2:4; Zech. 8:23; 10:5; and in the New Testament, cf. also Mt. 1:23; Lk. 1:28; Acts 7:9; 10:38; 18:10; 2 Thes. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:22; Rev. 21:3.

when the Spirit of God would come in a greater way, “for He dwells with you and will be in you” (Jn. 14:17).

Paul expounds the meaning of the New Covenant promise by alluding to the Old Testament, especially the symbolism of the temple. He emphasized that our New Covenant relationship with God realizes the meaning of God’s covenant indwelling, for he tells us that the Spirit of God dwells in Christians in a manner analogous to the Spirit’s dwelling in the temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). God is our God and we are His people because we are collectively the temple (and individually the temples) that He indwells (2 Cor. 6:16). Since the formula “I will be their God” and similar expressions define the covenant (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10), both Old Testament and New Testament witness to the fact that indwelling speaks of a covenant relationship. We see that the indwelling of the Spirit in Israel’s tabernacle and temple was typological prophecy of the future indwelling of the Spirit in the Church. To indwell is to be in covenant and to be in covenant is to dwell together.

Thus the language of indwelling in its various uses is quintessential covenantal language. This language is used both for Christ’s relationship to God and for our relationship to God, suggesting an analogy between the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity as a covenantal relationship and the covenantal relationship between the triune God and His people. In other words, God in His saving grace brings His people into that same covenantal love that is shared by the Persons of the Trinity. The language of indwelling obviously does not mean that we become ontologically one with Him. The distinction between Creator and creature is absolute and eternal. One of the most important basic issues in the Christian worldview is that the categories of eternity and time are never mixed. Jesus is both God and man. He is *not* a mixture of divinity and humanity, a thing neither God nor man, but half-way between the two. Ontological unity between Creator and creature is not conceivable in the biblical view. However, that does not mean that God is far from us or that we cannot deeply relate to Him. The unity of covenantal oneness, expressed perfectly in the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity, is granted to us in Christ. We are in Him and He is in us by His Spirit. In the covenant, God and man are united in love.

**The unity of covenantal oneness, expressed perfectly in the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity, is granted to us in Christ.**



## One in Him

In the covenant, man and man are also united (Jn. 17:20–23). Union in God grounds our mutual union in one another. In fact, man is a covenantal being, even when he does not know God or acknowledge His covenant. So, for example, close human relations even among non-Christians reflect the covenantal notion of indwelling. The analogy is not exact of course, but all people experience something of what it means for another person to “indwell” them. No doubt most of them are seldom aware of this indwelling, but when a close friend or a beloved family member dies, they feel that a part of their life has died also. This is actually more than a feeling; those we are close with are indeed a part of us. Their departure means we lose a relationship that contributed to the constitution of our very self.

Christians experience oneness with one another in worshipping God, in serving Him, and in the fellowship they enjoy in Christ. All of this is an extension of oneness with Christ, a chief aspect of the Gospel proclamation.

To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.  
(Col. 1:27)

## Conclusion

The structure of covenant relationship, used throughout the Bible when it speaks of man’s relationship with God, and the covenant idea of indwelling, present from the time of the Garden of Eden, both apply to the relationships of the Persons of the Trinity. God the Father and Jesus appear in the Gospels not only as God and the human Messiah but as divine Persons who manifest in time who they are in eternity. When Jesus asserted their mutual indwelling, He defined the origin of the whole covenantal idea of indwelling in the mystery of the mutually interpenetrating Persons of God.

These facts, of course, must form our standard for considering the meaning of the covenant idea. Certainly, if the covenant describes the eternal relationships of the Persons of the Trinity, then the primary meaning of the covenant cannot be merely “agreement” or “contract.” Rather, the covenant is a relationship of love in which each party commits himself to sacrifice



and self-denial for the blessing of the other. In this way, the Trinity illuminates our understanding of the covenant and the covenant elucidates the relationships of the Persons of the Trinity. We sense even more the wonder of God's love in creating man in His image and redeeming him, in order to bring a new race of men into the most intimate covenant fellowship of love. Christ brings His people into the covenantal fellowship of the Godhead.

This has other ramifications for the Christian worldview as well. We realize clearly how the biblical teaching that God is love harmonizes with the teaching that God is holy and righteous, for these truths meet in the doctrine of the covenant. As a result, a fundamental unity exists between love and righteousness, relationship and law, and personal fellowship and truth. A covenantal understanding of God brings us to a deeper understanding of man as well, for man is the image of God, and his individual and social psychology are inescapably covenantal. To know man, we must know God. For God is not simply "out there." He confronts all men in the creation and dwells in His people.

No other worldview or religion has a view of God that allows, let alone teaches, such a perspective. The Christian God is a God in covenant relationship, because He is a God in whom three Persons mutually indwell one another in a covenant fellowship of love. Because God is equally and ultimately three and one, the covenant is essential to His nature. Neither polytheism nor the doctrine of the monad can ever truly incorporate this concept. The polytheistic gods support their personhood through their competition with one another, not through love and mutual sacrifice. Whatever oneness may exist in a polytheistic worldview comes from a force or being more ultimate than the gods. The monad of religions like Islam loses its personhood in a different way, for the love that is the essence of the covenant cannot be essential to an unrelated monad. The bottom line is that the relationship between man and the monad or man and the gods is not an ethical relationship that reflects the ultimate truth of reality. Without the unity of covenant love between God and man, the idea of salvation never attains the biblical aim of the perfection of love and beauty in the kingdom of righteousness.

The Persons of the Trinity share a covenant of love and bestow that love on man. Trinitarianism offers us a doctrine of a God who is in contact with us and the everyday realities of our world. As we shall see in subsequent

chapters, the fact that God dwells in His people has broad implications that further distinguish the Christian worldview.

## Review Questions

1. Why is God's self-revelation in history relevant to the doctrine of the Trinity?
2. How does God reveal Himself in history?
3. What are the elements of a covenant?
4. Show that the Father's relationship with the Son was a covenant.
5. Show how the elements of the covenant relate to the book of Deuteronomy.
6. State the elements of the covenant as elements of a worldview.
7. What is the essence of a covenant?
8. Explain how the marriage relationship offers a good illustration of the biblical covenant between God and man.
9. What does the word *perichoresis* mean?
10. Explain the meaning of the Father being in the Son and the Son in the Father.
11. Explain the idea of God indwelling His people and how it relates to perichoresis.
12. What does it mean for the Church to be one in God?

## 4. Trinity and Creation

“WHERE DID we come from?” “Are we alone?” Earth origins and extraterrestrial life are connected problems in the modern worldview, and the government of the United States of America is engaged in a project to discover the answer to these basic questions. This is not some secret FBI *X-Files* project like Fox Mulder’s quest for his long-lost sister. The questions above come from a document published by NASA, which includes an “Origins Subcommittee” that works with people all over the United States not only to search for the answers to these questions but also to create educational programs for the nation’s youth based on this research and discovery.<sup>1</sup> The question of origins is very much alive. It is a question that everyone must answer to build a comprehensive worldview.

### Cosmogony and Worldview

The word *cosmogony* comes from two Greek words, *cosmos*, referring to the ordered universe, and *genesis*, meaning “beginning.” Cosmogony is the doctrine of the beginning of the universe, which was conveyed in the ancient world through creation myths. The similar word *cosmology* means one’s doctrine of the cosmos. Cosmology is rooted in cosmogony and sometimes is used to include it. *Worldview* is a more vague term, since it is not always a

<sup>1</sup> See <http://origins.jpl.nasa.gov/>.



developed or clearly held doctrine. In substance, however, worldview and cosmology are very close. In the religions of the ancient world, stories of the world's creation that we now regard as myths were then foundations for empires. In the story of the world's beginning, the theology of the society became concrete in a manner that provided ultimate justification for a way of life, including the authority of priests and kings.

In the secular worldview of the modern West, we have our own version of the creation story. The presently reigning myth is the story of the Big Bang.<sup>2</sup> The Big Bang and an expanding universe that gradually cools makes fascinating television and, coupled with Darwinian evolution, the Big Bang

**The question of origins is one that everyone must answer to build a comprehensive worldview.**

allows modern men to “explain” the existence of the universe and man—without recourse to God. What does that mean for the modern worldview? It means that man is the measure of all things. There is no lawgiver, no lord, no

absolute authority above man to whom man must answer. There is no meaning in the world except the meaning that man creates. There is no purpose in the world or in human history beyond the purposes of individual men or societies.

Neither the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe nor the Darwinian theory of the origin of species is a scientific theory in the strict sense of the term. The Big Bang is not subject to experimental verification, nor can Darwinian evolution be reproduced in the laboratory. Even if they were the kind of thing that could be reproduced in a laboratory, that would not change the fact that the origin of the universe is a *historical* issue. Even if scientists were able to demonstrate that there are many possible ways for a universe to begin, it would not tell us how our own universe *did* begin. Moreover, the secular myths that constitute the religious cosmogony of the modern world are built upon assumptions about the way things must be—assumptions that exclude God from the beginning. When we begin our investigation of reality with assured confidence that the only thing that can and does exist is the material world, the discovery that we can—in a manner of speaking—explain all things without God should come as no surprise.

<sup>2</sup> String theory is not yet included in the standard, “once-upon-a-time” science program for the children because it is simply too complex.

We should note, however, that the materialist faith is unstable and inconsistent. Bertrand Russell depicted the place of man in the scientific cosmos in language that has often been quoted.

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>3</sup>

Having made this grand statement, Russell then goes on to speak of good and evil, of renunciation, of love and worship and liberation. Russell seems unaware of the irony that none of these words can have any real meaning in a worldview built upon modern cosmogony. Why should Russell retain these ethical notions? Once the Christian faith and its noble truths have been introduced to a society, they take such a deep hold that even its most passionate enemies pay Christianity the compliment of stealing from its Bible in order to oppose its teachings. But if we are going to have a world that began with a Big Bang and developed through a process of evolutionary accident, we cannot get beyond the despair. We are the unfortunate animals who know that we must die. Our education consists in learning that the universe is a fascinating but tragic farce, which holds forth the mocking promise of meaning only to deny it to those who really understand.

It is hardly surprising that early in the twentieth century men like Aldous Huxley already saw that “No philosophy is completely disinterested. The pure love of truth is always mingled to some extent with the need, consciously or unconsciously felt by even the noblest and most intelligent philosophers, to

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man's Worship,” *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 107.



justify a given form of personal or social behaviour, to rationalize the traditional prejudices of a given class or community.”<sup>4</sup> Huxley applied this thinking to himself when he explained that he and most of his friends had accepted the theory of evolution as a means of escaping from Christianity.<sup>5</sup> If evolution was true, man was liberated from any sort of meaning for the world, especially the Christian meaning. Alas, however, the elimination of meaning at the cosmic level meant that man, as the only creator of meaning and the definer of good and evil, was free to create “local” meaning in places like Nazi Germany. Huxley observed that those who “accept the doctrine of absolute meaninglessness tend in a short time to become so much dissatisfied with their philosophy (in spite of the services it renders) that they will exchange it for any dogma, however manifestly nonsensical, which restores meaning if only to a part of the universe.”<sup>6</sup> In the end, Huxley himself dropped the idea of evolution as a theory of meaninglessness and turned to the idea that in the impersonal cosmos, man can find a meaning through mystical experience, like the great mystics of the past, both East and West. As early as 1938 we can find an evolutionist espousing a new-age mysticism.<sup>7</sup> What he apparently did not realize is that something very similar to his mysticism was the intellectual background for Hitler’s National Socialism.<sup>8</sup>

Cosmogony and cosmology will not go away, nor will they be limited to nice stories about how everything began. If we say, “In the beginning, Bang!” our confession of faith will lead to moral, ethical, social, and political consequences. Animal rights, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are part and parcel of a new ethical system that is being promoted at Princeton University.<sup>9</sup> A crucial assumption of Peter Singer’s popular ethics textbook is a

<sup>4</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods Employed for their Realization* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1938), 272.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>7</sup> He speaks of “direct intuition of an impersonal spiritual reality, underlying all being” and he seems certain that personal reality is “not an ultimate fact.” Meditation leads to the mystical experience of oneness. And this “cosmology has its correlated ethic,” which is that “Good is that which makes for unity; Evil is that which makes for separateness.” *Ibid.*, 294, 295, 303.

<sup>8</sup> George L. Mosse, “The Mystical Origins of National Socialism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar., 1961): 81–96.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.)



logical conclusion of evolution: there is no reason to assume the superiority of the human race above other species. Besides promoting political policies that involve the redistribution of wealth and restrictive laws to protect the environment, Singer advocates legislation to limit the use of animals for experiments, while at the same time liberalizing our rights to terminate human life. Of course, not all evolutionists agree with Singer, but his views show us the kinds of practical issues that bring cosmogony and worldview into the political arena. In the end, the battle for the hearts and minds of men is never separated from the story of the beginning.

## Creation and Covenant

Christians often argue for the scientific validity of the biblical story, and their arguments have made a contribution to the understanding of the Bible and history. But in a discussion of the Christian worldview, the science of the book of Genesis is not the focus. All that scientific apologetics for the book of Genesis gives us is the basic truth that God created the world. In a worldview discussion, this fact is certainly fundamental. Also, the historicity of the Genesis account is taken for granted for the simple reason that the Bible takes it for granted. The historicity of the original account, in other words, is already an element in the worldview of the Bible. What is important for a deeper understanding is some consideration of the account itself and what it teaches us about the world.

### Covenantal Structure

When we look at the actual narrative of creation, we are struck by the way God does things. Modern men often scoff at the biblical account because they think the idea that God created the world in just six days is absurd, as if it should have taken longer. If we know who the biblical God is, however, the problem is precisely the opposite. Why did it take God any longer than a mere instant? Why did God create over a period of days? Why did God speak to things that did not yet exist and command them to exist? Why did God go through an almost *ceremonial* process of evaluating what He made each day and pronouncing it good? The narrative draws our attention to the process itself, indicating its importance for our knowledge of God and the world.

How shall we describe the course of creation? In a word, the process is covenantal. Consider: God the Lord commands the world into existence. What does creation by command mean? First, creation by command teaches God's transcendent sovereignty. The world does not emanate from God's being or evolve from eternally existing stuff, as in the myths of the ancient world. Nor does God merely mold preexisting things into the forms He desires. God makes the nothing into something by His absolute command, demonstrating His sovereignty. He is the Lord above all, the Lord on whom all depends for its subsistence. In distinction from all the stories of the ancient world around Israel, in the Bible, God and the creation are never mixed. His transcendence and the dependence of all things upon Him is part of what the Bible means when it speaks of Him as Creator. The creative Word exhibits His Lordship over all.

Second, we can say that creation by command both *presupposes* and *establishes* a relationship. The command presupposes something because God addresses His commands to specific entities, such as light. When God commands the light, which does not yet physically exist as light, clearly it does in fact exist in the plan of God. God is bringing about His own will and plan when He creates by command. The command establishes a relationship in the sense that God's command determines His lordship over that which He has commanded. We might say that the very existence of light constitutes a special sort of existence, existence as "being-in-obedience" to the Lord's command. Light is not ontologically primitive. God did not take something already there and bend it to His purpose. Its existence is obedient existence. Needless to say, that is true not just of light, but of the whole creation. To exist in obedience to God the Lord is to exist in covenant with Him. To put it in different words, creation by command means that He created the world into the covenant relationship. God did not give a covenant to the world after He created it. The very existence of the created world is covenantal.

Third, creation by command leads to a natural covenantal sequence, the almost ceremonial process of creation that we see in Genesis. Where there is a command, there is naturally judgment. God looks to see if the light has obeyed His command. Where there is evaluation, there is naturally sanction. God blesses all that He has created. Anyone familiar with the Bible will

**In a word, the process of creation is covenantal.**

God's command determines that which He has said that the very existence of light constitutes a special sort of existence.



recognize that command, evaluation, and sanction is the characteristic covenantal sequence. God the covenant Lord commands the world, which obeys and comes into existence. God looks on what He has created and then blesses the world that He has made. The covenantal progression—command, evaluation, and blessing—not only shows us the relationship between God and the world, it reveals the way God works and shows us what kind of God the Creator is.

It is clear also that the progression moves generally from the “lesser” to the “greater.” God first creates the world, then fills it with plants, and then creates animals. Finally He creates man. The hierarchy implicit here is made clear when God makes man the lord of the world, the representative head under God (Gen. 1:28–30). God gave the whole world to Adam and Eve and with it the task of bringing it to greater glory. Representation and hierarchy, structural elements of the covenant, are an important aspect of the creation of man and his responsibility in the world.

From the perspective of cosmogony and cosmology, what we see in Genesis is not just a story about what happened long ago. We see and understand the covenant relationship that God has with the world and with man, and the place of man as representative covenant head of the world. Genesis tells not merely of the beginning of the world, but also the *nature* of the world—the way things are. God created by His Word (Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5). Now He rules by His Word (Ps. 103:20; 107:24–26; 147:15–18; 148:5–6, 8; etc.). The book of Hebrews points to the covenantal nature of the world when it tells us that Jesus is “upholding all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). The original world was created into the covenant by the Word of God, and since then God, in His providential direction of the world, continues to guide it by His covenantal Word.

## Covenantal Meaning

If the world is created into a covenant with God and if man is set over the world as God’s covenantal representative, then there is a fundamental covenantal meaning to the world. To fully appreciate the creation narrative from a Christian perspective, we must consider it in light of the New Testament revelation of God, for what the New Testament shows us about the Trinity is vital to our understanding of the creation.



*Trinitarian Love*

The creation of the world is a trinitarian work. This is seen as early as Genesis 1:2 where the work of the Holy Spirit in creation is introduced (see also Ps. 104:30; Is. 40:13). However, it is not until the revelation we call the New Testament that we can fully appreciate the meaning of the Genesis account. The New Testament states that God created the world (Eph. 3:9), and here “God” clearly refers to the Father. But we read that the Son created the world (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16). Just as Scripture teaches that Father, Son, and Spirit cooperated in the creation of the world, so it also depicts them as working together to save the world, which the New Testament calls the *re-creation* of the world. Redemption entails a new creation (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17), a new heaven (2 Pet. 3:13), a new earth (Rev. 21:1), a new covenant (Heb. 9:15), and a new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). In Christ, all things have become new.

When the trinitarian work of redemption is called a new creation, it suggests a repetition and renewal of the trinitarian work of the original creation. In other words, God works in similar ways in creation and redemption. What does this mean concretely? Consider what Paul tells us: not only was the world created by Christ, but “for” or “unto” Christ (Col 1:16).<sup>10</sup> What does that imply? The key to understanding what it means that the first creation was “for” Christ may be seen in the doctrine of the new creation. In the doctrine of redemption, we see that God saved a world of men and gave them to Christ (Jn. 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 24; Ps. 2:8). So also, Jesus tells us that men can only come unto Him when the Father draws them (Jn. 6:44, 45,

**The Father, Son, and Spirit cooperate in both the creation and re-creation of the world.**

<sup>10</sup> Please note that I only address one trinitarian perspective on creation. It seems to me the most obvious and rich perspective, but there are others. For example, the Bible repeatedly says that God created the world *through* Christ. This statement is not elucidated in detail, but the fact that the Son is called the Word of God and that the creation of the world is ascribed to the Word suggests that we may regard God the Father as the one who speaks the Word, the Son as the Word spoken, and the Spirit as the breath of God which delivers the Word to its destination. We also have repeated examples of Father as the one who plans, the Son as the one who executes, and the Spirit as the one who applies. These and other trinitarian descriptions are relevant to creation and redemption. James Jordan suggests other trinitarian aspects of creation in his *Creation in Six Days: A Defense of the Traditional Reading of Genesis One* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999).

65). To fully appreciate this and complete the biblical picture, we must consider the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit's work is as vital in the new creation as in the old. The Father brings men to Christ and gives men to Christ only *through* the work of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:5–6; Is. 44:3–4; Ezek. 36:25–27). The Spirit brings the Bride to the Son. Then the Son sanctifies the Bride by the Spirit (Eph. 5:25–27; Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Thes. 2:13). When the Church is perfected and Christ's work in the world is completed at the end of history, He will present all things back to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:28). Thus, the Spirit is seen bringing the Bride both from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father.

Now the trinitarian pattern is unambiguous: from the Father by the Spirit to the Son, then from the Son by the Spirit to the Father. This applies to the original creation and to the redemption of the world in Christ also. The Father gives the church and the new world unto Christ by the Spirit. Christ sanctifies the redeemed world by the Spirit and then offers it back to the Father. Redemption is built upon this mutual giving, showing us with greater clarity what had been the pattern for the trinitarian work of the original creation. From the beginning, God created the world *for* Christ as well as through Christ (Col. 1:16)—which means that the world was given to the Son as a gift from the Father. The Son, in turn, was to have worked in the world by the Holy Spirit through humanity to fulfill the purpose of creation and offer the world back to the Father. The sin of Adam and Eve interrupted the process (in a manner of speaking); however, their sin did not undo the plan of God. Because of man's sin, the work of the Son in perfecting the creation in order to give it back to the Father must include the work of redemption. So, when the world was lost, the Father gave the Son to the world through the work of the Spirit (Mt. 1:18, 20; Lk. 1:35). The Son died for the sins of the world, rose from the dead, and ascended on high to work with a new human race, bringing the world back to the Father through the Spirit (Jn. 3:16–17; 12:31–33; 16:8–15; Mt. 28:18–20).

The mutual giving of the covenant characterizes both the original and the new creations, because mutual giving defines the covenant as the expression of love. God so loved the world that He *gave* His Son. Paul says that the Son of God “loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). In the same way, the greatest love a man can show is to give his life for his friends (Jn.



15:13). More than that, because of the love and grace given to us in the gospel, each of us should respond in love, which means we should present our bodies as living sacrifices unto God (Rom. 12:1–2). The theology of the cross is not only the theology of sacrifice as the payment for sin—though it is certainly and even primarily that—it is also the theology of sacrifice as love and giving: “walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph. 5:2). All of this in turn is grounded in the love of the trinitarian covenant. In the eternal love of the covenant, the Father gives Himself to the Son by the Spirit and the Son gives Himself to the Father by the Spirit. Therefore, when God creates the world, the same relationships come to expression: God creates the world for the Son by the Spirit and the Son completes the world for the Father by the Spirit. The covenantal meaning of the world, then, is that the world is the love gift of the Father through the Spirit to the Son. It is an expression of the covenantal fellowship of love in the Trinity, an aspect of their mutual enjoyment of one another.

### *Symbols of God*

Related to this love gift is a second aspect of the meaning of the world. The world is created to manifest God, to show His glory: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). But it is not just the heavens—the Bible tells us that every created being and thing reveals God. Even the events of history that we find most distasteful are lessons to us from God.

The tents of the destroyers prosper, and those who provoke God are secure, whom God brings into their power. But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you; and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you. Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you; and let the fish of the sea declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this: in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind? Does not the ear test words, as the palate tastes its food? (Job 12:6–11)

Job’s point is not simply “God did it.” Job is saying that in all of these matters—the animals and the very dust of the earth that God created, as well as the mysterious and unpleasant facts of the world’s history—we see the hand of God and come to know Him. God confronts us through His



creation. Paul says that the invisible things of God are known since the creation of the world because the world reveals God's invisible attributes (Rom. 1:19–20).

To state this more specifically, we must say that all of the world and every fact and created thing is a general symbol of God in the sense that everything represents Him, manifesting who He is and confronting us with His presence. Man is God's special symbol, His image (Gen 1:26–28). As such, "*Man is the only symbol that is also a symbol-maker.*"<sup>11</sup> The world and history are symbols because God created them to reveal Him.

**Symbolism creates reality, not vice versa.**

Man is God's special symbol because God created man as His representative in creation, His very image. In the biblical creationist worldview, symbol and representation are profoundly significant. James Jordan expresses it in these words, "In a very real sense, symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man."<sup>12</sup>

The power of symbolism is the power of worldview presuppositions. It is the greatest power in the world. All of language is symbolic, of course, but symbolism is not limited to words. Symbolism creates reality, not vice versa. This is another way of saying that essence precedes existence. God determined how things should be, and then they were.<sup>13</sup>

As we pointed out above, God's plan to create light and His intention for light precede the existence of light itself. But there is more. The creation of the world as a symbol of God also means that the whole world of symbols is a linked network that reveals God in one manner or another. Animals, plants, rocks, planets, and suns all reveal God in their own distinctive ways, but they also reveal Him as they are integrated into a symbolic system that proclaims the name of the Creator.

The center of this network is mankind, God's special symbol and *symbolizer*. We learn of God through the world and imitate God's symbolizing in our daily life. We make special days, special clothes, and special documents that communicate various meanings that we assign to them. Our ceremonies

<sup>11</sup> James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988). The entire section here on symbolism is based upon Jordan's work, which is the best introduction to biblical symbolism as the key of the biblical worldview.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

commemorate special historical events. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. In all of these activities, we are being distinctly God-like. He is the ultimate symbolizer. Our work in history is always modeled after—consciously or unconsciously—His prior symbolizing work in creation.

This suggests that man's thinking cannot be confined to the kind of rational processes we find in philosophical logic, because thinking involves the whole man in ways that are too messy for a syllogism. Our conscious thinking reflects our dreams and fears, our family backgrounds, our culture, our relationships with friends and enemies, our own physical bodies and appetites, not to mention an infinite number of detailed factors of heredity, experience, aesthetic sensitivities, and too many other things to list. However, the most fundamental aspect of our true inner reality is our relationship with God. The Bible says that we either fear God—understanding “fear” as love, trust, and reverence to our Father in heaven—or we hate Him (Prov. 1:7; Rom. 8:7). Under the influence of this basic attitude, man's thoughts connect and develop in an infinite variety of ways.

Thus, neither scientific discovery nor logical deduction can be limited exclusively to the rational processes that modern man believes are his special dignity. On the contrary, scientific discovery and everyday attempts to figure out our difficulties include all sorts of intuitional, social, and other essentially non-rational factors. In particular, what we call *metaphor* is not just a matter of poetry, it is an inescapable part of our hardware, for we are attuned to the symbols of the world that God has created. We feel the presence of God in the world, whether we can find the right chain of reasoning to explain what we feel or not. We see more than we can tell in syllogisms. We think in part by rational deduction and induction, but we also discover by intuiting the associations of the symbolic system of God's world.

What we have seen about the working of man's mind also teaches us something about God. We must not think of Him as the grand computer, an infinite digital system. It is true that God is wholly rational and there is nothing He does not fully know. Neither the world nor history contains mystery for God. To Him, the whole is a logical system, but the links of the system are not impersonal. The system is not definable in formulas. God the omniscient one is also the grand artist who made a beautiful world that symbolizes Himself and reveals His glory. This revelation is not for man



only. If the world is the gift of the Father to the Son through the Spirit, then the world reveals the glory of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father. The revelation of God's glory is first and foremost an aspect of intertrinitarian fellowship and communion. Man may never know the full meaning of the symbols of the world, for the ramifications of each and every symbol resonate with the whole in an unfathomably complex matrix of truth. But God knows the full meaning, and that is what matters. The Persons of the Trinity share their enjoyment of the world with one another as the world reflects the beauty of God.

The introduction of sin into the world brings further complexity. Without sin, harmony, beauty, and glory would have increased until the end when the world would have fulfilled its potential and God would have been wholly satisfied with His creation. In a symbolic world, sin has symbolic manifestations. It follows that the fallen world includes symbolic representations of God's wrath against man's sin and rebellion. As we shall later see, wrath is outraged love. It is the love of the Father for the Son that will not allow His name to be tarnished. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. In God's wrath, then, what we see is the same covenantal fellowship of love that characterized the original creation, now working through the history of fallen man.

When we understand that the symbolism of the world is primarily an aspect of the trinitarian conversation and fellowship, we are ready to appreciate how profoundly significant it is that God reveals Himself to man. It is not so much that God condescends to speak to man, as it is that God lifts man up into the heavenly conversation. The symbolizing work of creation—the glorious expression of God's infinite and manifold beauty—is first of all a fellowship of love between the Persons of the Trinity. But God brings man into that fellowship. To be in covenant with God is to be in dialogue with Him. In this way, we are allowed to know what God knows and enjoy what He enjoys: "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps. 34:8).

## Covenantal Purpose

Trinitarian love as the essence of the covenant and symbolism as covenantal revelation form the broad covenantal context for the doctrine of man. When God created man, there was a trinitarian counsel: "Let us make man in our



own image and according to our own likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This is fulfilled immediately: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). Man was created in the image of *God*, not of God *and* the angels.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, man images God not merely as an individual, but as a society. Adam and Eve together, covenantally united in marriage, are the image of God. Together they are His covenantal representatives in the world. All their children after them would have been part of the same covenantal family and fellowship had Adam not sinned.

When we come to the story of the creation of man, we understand for the first time the meaning of creation in six days. God could have created the world in an instant, but He did not. He did the work of creation not only to bring things into existence, but, more importantly, to bring things into a special kind of existence, and to do it in way that would establish a pattern for man to follow. God worked six days and rested one to show man how to finish the work of glorifying the world.

Just as God created the world as an act of intertrinitarian fellowship, He gave the world to man as gift of love, for man is His image. God worked in the world to manifest Himself, each Person of the Trinity bringing glory to the others. Having been created into a covenant relationship, man shares that same fellowship of love. God gives him the world that He has made in six days and says to man, in effect, “Imitate Me. Work six days and rest one and complete the work I have begun.” This is man’s historical task, a work of covenantal fellowship, finishing the work of creation by bringing to mature expression the glory that God placed in the world. Gold is a good example of the meaning of this work. God hid gold in the earth so that man could mine it from the ground, refine it, and then use it to make objects of beauty that manifest the glory of God and bring pleasure to both God and man.

**The essence of man’s work is worship.**

Man’s sin in the Garden did not suspend the historical task. Noah is given the same commission that Adam was (Gen. 9:1–7). But man cannot truly fulfill his task apart from Christ, for the essence of man’s work is *worship*. God gives the world to man as a gift of love. Man responds to God’s

<sup>14</sup> This is the interpretation of “Let us” suggested by many Jewish thinkers and not a few Christians.

love by presenting himself and his work back to God. His labor is sharing in the covenantal fellowship of the Trinity. To offer one's work to God as a response to His infinite love in Christ is what it means for a Christian to live out His calling in the this world. Thus Paul says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God before prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

In a world of sin, giving ourselves to God requires dying to self. The vain attempt to put ourselves first, above God and all other men, exhibits the very heart of our sinful nature. Jesus had to die to save us from sin, taking the curse that our sins deserve. We do not die for our own sins or for the sins of others, but we are called to walk in the way of the cross. The way of the cross is a life of self-denial, presenting ourselves unto God as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2). If this aspect of our labor for God is missing, all our works will be in vain—that is, as far as we are concerned. God uses the works of all men, including the wicked, to further His kingdom program, but only those deeds that are done in righteousness are accepted as expressions of covenantal love and fellowship.

Paul tells us that the resurrection victory of Christ is the guarantee that God's plan will be accomplished. Jesus did not just die for sin. He also rose from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of God. There, He rules the world and works through His body the Church to finish the work that God began when He created the world. Jesus, the last Adam, will finish the work that He Himself began in His life and by His death and resurrection. Just as a sinless Adam would have been a covenantal partner of God to complete the work of making a glorious world, so man in Christ is made a covenantal partner to fight the good fight and to rebuild the ruined city. Christ "the head" works through the Spirit in His body, the Church, so that God and man in covenantal union will bring about the glorious realization of God's original creation purpose.

For since by man came death,  
 by man came also the resurrection of the dead.  
 For as in Adam all die,  
 so also in Christ shall all be made alive.  
 But each in his own order:  
 Christ the firstfruits; then they that are Christ's, at his coming.  
 Then cometh the end,



when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father;  
 when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power.  
 For he must reign,  
 till he hath put all his enemies under his feet.  
 The last enemy that shall be abolished is death.  
 For, He put all things in subjection under his feet.  
 But when he saith, All things are put in subjection,  
 it is evident that he is excepted who did subject all things unto him.  
 And when all things have been subjected unto him,  
 then shall the Son also himself be subjected to him  
 that did subject all things unto him, that God may be all in all.  
 (1 Cor. 15:21–28)

## Conclusion

The biblical view of creation has important implications that we will explore in the rest of this book, but two of those implications may be stated briefly here since they will not be considered further. First, we should consider the meaning of this view of creation for science. The biblical view of creation as the gift of the Father to the Son through the Spirit augments the truth expressed in an earlier chapter that the Christian worldview is totally personal. Since creation itself and history are under the authority of God's Word, the trinitarian God Himself is obviously the heart of the Christian "theory of everything." There are no impersonal laws, only God's habits. But this view does not render science irrelevant or less important. On the contrary, the Christian view of a rational and personal world was the basis for the birth of science, and it is the only real foundation for continuing to pursue science in our day. As Stanley Jaki demonstrated:

Great cultures, where the scientific enterprise came to a standstill, invariably failed to formulate the notion of physical law, or the law of nature. Theirs was a theology with no belief in a personal, rational, absolute transcendent Lawgiver, or Creator. Their cosmology reflected a pantheistic and animistic view of nature caught in the treadmill of perennial, inexorable returns. The scientific quest found fertile soil only when this faith in a personal, rational Creator had truly permeated a whole culture, beginning with the centuries of the High Middle Ages. It was that faith which provided, in sufficient measure, confidence in the rationality of the universe, trust in progress, and



appreciation of the quantitative method, all indispensable ingredients of the scientific quest.<sup>15</sup>

This view of creation also makes the purpose of science very clear. Science is not the pursuit of ultimate answers, but penultimate answers—answers that will make us better stewards of the world. Science gives us tools that extend our understanding in order to gain wisdom for dominion. From a Christian perspective, therefore, the work of science is a vital aspect of man's fulfillment of his historical destiny. Man cannot develop the creation to its full potential without the work of science.

Scientific knowledge enables us to use our resources more wisely and productively, which in turn allows us to build a world in which disease, poverty, and many other ravages of man's sin may be reduced. Science ties into works of charity, not only through medicine but also through technology, energy-related science, and agriculture, to name only a few of the most obvious aspects. Science extends the comfort and blessings of our lives as it extends dominion. With planes, trains, and automobiles, we are freed in part from the burdens of travel and the limits of time. Refrigerators, computers, televisions, and washing machines release us from some of the time-consuming tasks of the past and give us more time to enjoy the blessings of this life—an essential aspect of God's plan in creating the world. He made foods with different flavors so that we could turn the simple act of obtaining necessary nourishment into gastronomic delight and fellowship. A meal can be a work of art in which we rejoice in the goodness of God. It is an example of how we take His gifts, combine them in new ways, and transform them into something even more glorious. In our day, a repast of fine cuisine depends upon the advances of science and technology.

Another implication of this view of creation is a Christian view of the environment.<sup>16</sup> There is an oft-repeated slander that Christianity endorses

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Jaki, *Science and Creation*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), viii. Note that Jaki thinks of law in terms of the personal command of the Creator, not as an impersonal principle to which both God and man must submit. In this sense, his perspective is more or less the same as that presented here, that natural law as such does not exist. What we call laws are God's covenantal ways. Jaki is correct, however, in insisting that God's ways are regular and law-like, for man could not exercise dominion if they were not.

<sup>16</sup> Two books that deal with important environmental issues are Peter Huber's *Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) and Bjørn

the “rape of the world,” since it says that man is lord and he can do what he pleases. This is similar to the slander that says because Christianity teaches that man is the head of his home, it permits men to abuse their wives. What the Bible really teaches is very different. According to the Bible, to be the leader means to sacrifice oneself for the other, as Christ sacrificed Himself for the Church. If Christ is the pattern for the husband—and He is—then what the Bible calls for is self-sacrificial love that glorifies the wife. This is not a view that promotes abuse of any kind. In the same way, if we view the world as the gift of the Father to the Son through the Spirit, we cannot treat the world with reckless abandon. Quite the contrary, we should work to glorify it and bring out its potential so that, in union with Christ, we can offer it back to God in gratitude for His goodness.

In ancient Israel, God gave a parcel of land to each family. Their responsibility was to work the land to develop it and bring out its potential, a work that would require generations of labor. Each generation had the responsibility to take what it inherited and improve it for the next generation, so that each generation would receive more not less, better not worse, than what the previous generation inherited. Generational growth and progress in the care of the land was the rule. This obviously included protecting one’s property as a part of God’s creation. Giving rest to the land and the animals, taking care not to pollute the land, and similar issues are all dealt with in the law of God for Israel. Though Old Testament land laws are not something that we are to apply directly to modern societies, we can apply their wisdom in thinking through our own situation so that we can glorify God through the creation.

Even if the details are complicated and vary according to historical circumstances, one basic principle can be stated simply: The best steward of land and property is the family. The family has the kind of loving interest that motivates one generation to labor self-sacrificially for the blessing of the next. No other institution is more fit for the role of primary owner of

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Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Neither of these books presents a specifically Christian view of the environment, and it is not my intention to endorse all they have to say. But both books show that what comes to us in the popular media as “facts” are often highly biased distortions of the real situation, and what are promoted as solutions are frequently neither necessary nor practical and sometimes may even be harmful to the environment, not to mention economically unfeasible.



property and steward of the land. The state has a role to play in making laws that protect property and punish those who abuse God's creation. The church has a role in training the family to understand its generational responsibility. But ownership of land should be primarily a family affair.

These and other issues deserve fuller development, but our point here is to suggest something of the fullness and richness of the practical applications of the Christian doctrine of creation as the cosmogony upon which the Christian view of the world is built.

## Review Questions

1. Define and explain the differences between the words *cosmogony*, *cosmology*, and *worldview*.
2. Explain the importance of cosmogony for one's worldview.
3. What do we learn from the way God created the world?
4. Explain the significance of creation by command.
5. How is trinitarian love seen in the creation of the world?
6. Relate the ideas of giving and love in the gospel and creation.
7. Explain what James Jordan means when he says, "symbolism is more important than anything else for the life of man."
8. What are the implications of the idea that man is not only a symbol but also a symbolizer?
9. What was God's original covenantal purpose for man and creation?
10. How did the introduction of sin into the world affect God's original covenantal purpose?





## 5. Trinity and Revelation

ONE OF THE MOST respected names in the field of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in an erudite volume entitled *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, characterizes “scripture” as a “human and an historical fact.”<sup>1</sup> For Smith and modern comparative religionists in general, “scripture” means simply “sacred book,” or a religiously authoritative book—one the community accepts, for without “a community reception and preservation of it, it is otiose.”<sup>2</sup> This sounds reasonable at first glance. Without a community that believes and preserves a sacred book, the book disappears. Sacred books, therefore, depend upon the religious community. But to define things in this manner is to ignore the most decisive issues. How can we separate the question of Scripture from the question of revelation or the even more fundamental question of the nature of God?

Christians are often told that every religion has its “bible” but in fact, only the religion of the Bible—Christianity—or religions that are to some degree based upon the Bible, such as Christian cults, Judaism, and Islam, have any real notion of *Scripture*. Even among these, Christianity alone has a meaningful doctrine of Scripture, because only Christianity has a meaningful doctrine of revelation, one that is an expression of its understanding of God. Contrary to the approach of scholars of comparative religion, the

<sup>1</sup> *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian claim is that apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, a meaningful doctrine of revelation and Scripture cannot be formulated.

## The Problem of God and Revelation

To appreciate the issues involved, it may help to consider the problem of God and revelation from the perspective of various religions. Before we can do that, however, we must first define the problem of God and revelation. To do this, we must consider two further questions, the first being more general: Why would God reveal Himself? The second more specific question relates revelation directly to the matter of scripture: Why would God reveal Himself in words? If every religion has its own “bible,” then every religion must have answers to these questions. Only a god who has a reason to *reveal himself in words* would give mankind a bible. But what sort of god is that? Asking these questions from the perspective of each of the great religions throws more light on the issue.

How might a Buddhist answer? Buddhism cannot even begin to address these questions, for in Buddhism there is no God and nothing properly analogous to the Christian idea of the Bible. It is true that Buddhists have holy books—more than any other religion, more than any man can read in one lifetime.<sup>3</sup> But Buddhists do not claim that these books constitute revelation from God. They are merely books of wisdom that are supposed to teach us the right path. Since, for the Buddhist, there is no God above to reveal Himself, “God’s Word” does not exist, except as an illusion in the minds of non-Buddhists.

**Only a god who has a reason to reveal himself in words would give mankind a bible.**

Muslims and Jews, on the other hand, believe in one God and claim to believe in the God of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> But because they deny the Trinity they have a problem when they confront the biblical notion of revelation. Why should

<sup>3</sup> “In the whole panorama, the first matter that strikes a comparativist observer is the stupendous quantities of Buddhist scriptures. . . . One may be confident that no one has ever read everything included in the Buddhist scriptural realm (or ever known all the languages needed to do so?); or ever wanted to.” *Ibid.*, 146–47.

<sup>4</sup> I say “claim” because Jesus taught that those who do not believe in Him do not know the true God or even really believe in the writings of Moses: “Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you



an eternal monad communicate when communication would be contrary to its very nature? A monad would have no reason to communicate, at least until the creation of rational beings. Even then, communication would not be necessary. If one says, as some Muslims do, that the Koran was “beside Allah for all eternity,” we have to ask why. Where did this impulse to communicate come from? In the case of Allah, the only ones to whom he could have communicated are men, angels, and the various and sundry other rational creatures in the Muslim cosmos. Communication with created beings, of course, is not eternal. But if communication is so essential to Allah that the Koran is eternal, then Allah is dependent on his creation for the realization of his desire to communicate. Allah, with the Koran beside him, *would be compelled* to create in order for his communication to be meaningful. For a Muslim to acknowledge this, of course, would be to deny Allah’s transcendence.

We still have no satisfactory answer to the question of revelation or to our related question: Why should an absolute monad, in whom there is no plurality whatsoever, communicate in *words*? Allah, after all, could have used any number of nonverbal means to communicate with his creatures, and he could have done so in a way that did not involve contaminating his eternal monadic purity with the corruption of plurality. For example, many Buddhist pantheists believe in an immediate act of intuition as a means to draw near to the One. When this and other means are available, why should a monad prefer a method that involves plurality? Furthermore, since plurality can never be ultimate when God is a monad, how could plural words communicate the nonplural ultimate truth? In Islam, words and every other form of multiplicity are inseparably connected with the creation. Herein lies the problem for Islam: the Koran is supposedly an eternal plurality of words—revealed by the essentially nonverbal One. Why would the One who is silent from eternity seek to communicate? The contradiction is profound.

Different but no less serious problems confront polytheistic religions, such as popular Hinduism. Though it is possible to imagine that the gods

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believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (John 5:45–47; cf. 8:19; 14:7; 16:3). We see how wrong is the common idea among Christians that the Jews believe in the God of the Old Testament and Christians in the God of the New. According to Jesus, whoever denies the Son does not know the true God at all.

communicate with one another, it is not possible to imagine that a *unified* word comes from the gods. In the biblical idea, Scripture is a self-consistent, comprehensive, integrated word. But the gods of polytheism contradict one another, and even the most powerful can never be sure that his or her plan will prevail in history. The gods do not and cannot know the future. It is beyond their control. Polytheistic revelation, then, however communicated, cannot be truth. At best, it could only be the hopes, fears, opinions, or pontifications of one finite but relatively powerful being to another, who, at least for a while, is metaphysically lower on the ontological scale.

Here, then, we see the real problem of Scripture that Smith failed to address: the problem of the nature of revelation and the nature of the God who reveals Himself. The biblical answer is so different from that of the other religions that we would expect it to be often remarked upon, but we would be wrong. It is usually ignored. Even scholars who have given the subject some thought do not seem to fully grasp it. For whatever reason, it is not adequately understood that Christianity has unique and compelling answers to the fundamental questions about revelation.

Why should God reveal Himself? Because He is a triune God for whom the fellowship and mutual communication of Father, Son, and Spirit is essential. It is not possible to imagine the Christian God not communicating, because communication is an aspect of His covenantal life as God. Why would God reveal Himself in words? Because there is something about human language that is so perfectly analogous to the communication of the Persons of the Trinity that the Second Person may be called the Word of God. Human language is the created analogue of one of the modes, perhaps the most important, of divine communication. For God to have given us verbal revelation, then, is what we would have expected. Once we posit that the Christian God creates man in His image and gives man the gift of language, it follows ineluctably that the Christian God must communicate verbally to His image, even as the Persons of the Trinity communicate among themselves.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the Persons of the Trinity do not literally speak words, for God is a spirit and He does not possess the physical apparatus for verbalizing as we do. But it would be perverse to assume that is a limitation. From the Christian perspective, the important point is that God created man in His own image. In so doing, He invites us to anthropomorphize. It is



## The God Who Communicates

In non-Christian religions and in distortions of biblical religion, the gods may or may not speak (or there may be no god at all), but verbal communication itself rarely, if ever, becomes a subject for theological reflection. When we consider the God of the Bible, however, the question of verbal communication is essential, for the biblical God *typically* acts by speaking—as when He created the world by commanding creatures into existence. Language—spoken and written—is obviously something much more fundamental for the biblical worldview than it can be for non-trinitarian religions or a secular worldview. This is not to suggest that God *only* reveals Himself by words, for the Bible is clear that God reveals Himself in other ways as well. It is common in Christian theology to speak of general and special revelation, meaning revelation that comes through the world God has created and revelation that comes through words. It is better, however, to consider revelation from a threefold perspective, for in His self-revelation, God's trinitarian character is manifest.<sup>6</sup>

Though a full biblical analysis of the idea of revelation is not possible here, understanding the basic trinitarian nature of revelation is essential to appreciating the place of revelation in the Christian worldview. A trinitarian approach to the biblical idea of revelation must emphasize that revelation is through His presence, through His words, and through His deeds. In other words, God reveals Himself (1) as a Person, (2) in His words, and (3) in manifestations of power. This threefold revelation of Himself to man is grounded in the fellowship of the Trinity. The God of the Bible is the God for whom self-giving and fellowship, communication and sharing, are essential to His triune covenantal being.

## The Son and the Father

As we have seen in a previous chapter, the relationship between Christ and the Father shows us not merely the relationship between the incarnate Son

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not simply that we have no other way to speak about God, it is, rather, that He desires us to speak of Him in these terms. Theological anthropomorphism presupposes the prior theomorphic creation.

<sup>6</sup> James Jordan offers a much fuller statement of a trinitarian perspective on revelation in his newsletter *Open Book*, no. 30–34 (<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com>).



and God. It also provides insight into the relationship among the Persons of the Godhead. We might think of the relationship between *Jesus* and the Father and the relationship between the *Son* and the Father as relatively distinct. As Jesus, the perfect man, our Savior has a relationship to God that is analogous to that of other men. As Son of God, His relationship to the Father is an aspect of the eternal trinitarian fellowship of God. This distinction should not be overemphasized, for Christ is one person, not two. We may distinguish the natures of Christ, but we must not divide the person. We must also keep in mind that God created man as His image in order for man to share in the covenantal fellowship of the Trinity. The incarnation demonstrates the closeness of God and man. Whether we think of Jesus as Son of God or as human Messiah, the relationship between Christ and the Father opens the door to trinitarian truth.

The Gospel of John, more than any other book, speaks of the relationship between Father and Son and shows the nature of trinitarian communication. The very first verse of the Gospel sets this forth in memorable language: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” There is more here than we can possibly expound. For our purposes, the expression “with God” in the second clause is particularly important. It is not the normal Greek word for “with.” Though the com-

**God reveals Himself (1) as a Person, (2) in His words, and (3) in manifestations of power.**

mon Greek word for “with” implies covenantal fellowship and relationship, the word used here intensifies the notion of personal relationship,

suggesting that the Word shares intimate, face-to-face fellowship with God.<sup>7</sup> This same idea of complete and full relationship and fellowship is repeated later in the preface of John’s Gospel: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (1:18). Jesus told the Jews He speaks what He has “seen” with His Father (8:38). He expressed the fullness of the mutual relationship in these words: “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (10:15). This perfect mutual knowledge among the Persons of the Trinity is grounded in the fact that they indwell one another and are completely open with one another. *Perichoresis* connotes communication without reserve (cf. 17:20–23).

<sup>7</sup> “*Pros* with the accusative presents a plane of equality and intimacy, face to face with each other.” A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960).

The fullness of perichoretic fellowship includes but is not limited to the verbal. The verbal aspect must be accentuated, however, because it stands in such stark contrast to the thinking of modern man, for whom words and language are thought to hinder true communication. The cultural and personal relativity of language, the various limitations of particular languages, and the presupposition that there must be some higher form of communication all combine to form the modern dogma that the most *real* forms of communication must be nonverbal.

This is not the Christian perspective, for if nonverbal communication were superior, the Son's fellowship with the Father would have taken some other form. Rather than depreciate verbal fellowship, the Bible emphasizes it, without of course implying that the relationship between the Father and the Son is *exclusively* verbal. Nothing exhibits the profundity of the verbal dimension of intertrinitarian fellowship more than the fact that the Son is called "the Word," speaking of His relationship to the Father (Jn. 1:1). Also, when Jesus says in the Gospel of John that the Father gave the Son the words He was to speak (17:8), we are not to think of a daily supply of text. Jesus is referring to the commission that was given to Him before the foundation of the world.<sup>8</sup>

All of this clearly shows that in the Christian worldview, God is a God who communicates verbally. The rich fellowship of personal oneness and love in the Trinity comes to expression in *words*. Because God is this sort of God, He created the world by *speaking* and gave man the gift of language. The mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity is the background for understanding the meaning of God's dwelling in us, and the ultimate basis for the idea that words can communicate truth.

## Threefold Revelation in the World

In the creation of the world, God reveals Himself in a threefold manner corresponding to the distinctive properties and operations of the Persons

<sup>8</sup> For various aspects of the relationship of the Father and the Son, all of which imply or specifically state the fullness and intimacy of their fellowship, see John 3:35; 5:17, 19–23, 26–27, 30, 36–37; 6:27, 37, 39, 46, 57; 8:16, 18–19, 28–29, 38, 42, 49, 54; 10:15, 30, 36–38; 12:26–28, 49–50; 13:3; 14:6–7, 9–11, 13, 20–21, 23, 31; 15:9; 16:15, 28, 32; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24–25.



of the Trinity. God the Father is preeminently the Person. God the Son is preeminently the Word. God the Spirit is preeminently the Power. Of course, all three Persons are equally personal, verbal, powerful, and active. In the Bible, however, the focus of God as Person is on the Father. The name “Word” belongs distinctly to the Son. God’s works of power are typically wrought through the Holy Spirit. Genesis provides an excellent example of this pattern. God spoke an omnipotent Word and created the world, over which the Spirit hovered. Here we have the Speaker, the Spoken, and the Breath of God. These distinctions also appear in the story of salvation, which is the new creation. In Scripture, we repeatedly see this pattern of God the Father planning, the Son executing, and the Spirit applying the plan of God. All three Persons are involved in every aspect of God’s work, but a particular work commonly has a special association with one of the Persons. This pattern suggests the manner in which God reveals Himself in the world also.<sup>9</sup>

### *Person*

God reveals Himself as a Person through the symbolism of creation, which points to the heavenly Father “from whom the whole family of creation is named” (Eph. 3:14–15). He is mysteriously present in the stars above, the mountains and seas around us, and the plants and animals. These all testify to His invisible attributes, His power, and Godhead (Rom. 1:20). God’s image is man, the special symbol of God who reveals Him in a fuller sense. Every man reveals God in some way, even the sinner who rejects Him. But of all men, God’s anointed servants revealed God most fully. Prophets, priests, and kings were chosen to be extra-special symbols of the true God—though many of them fulfilled their historical roles poorly. Also, in the Old Covenant era, God the Son Himself appeared in various forms. Two examples are the burning bush that Moses saw (Exod. 3:1–6) and the man that spoke to Samson’s parents (Judg. 13:1–21). These appearances provided men with something akin to a direct vision of God, but not until Jesus was born into the world was there a prophet, priest, and king who perfectly fulfilled His historical calling and revealed God wholly. Christ, who is “the brightness of

<sup>9</sup> We confess this distinct working every time we confess the Apostles’ Creed. The Creed says that God the Father is Creator, that the Son became man to die and rise from the dead to save us, and that the Holy Spirit is the giver of life to God’s people.



His glory and the express image of His person,” revealed God as no other man could, for He was not merely man, but God and man. In the Person of Christ, we know God face-to-face. Jesus revealed the Father so perfectly that He could say to Philip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

### *Word*

The Bible is the Word of God, but it is only part of God’s broader verbal revelation. When God created Adam, He spoke to him, which means that Adam was created with the gift of language from the beginning. Language is a necessary aspect of man’s being created in the image of God. Since God communicates within the Trinity, verbal revelation is essential to the covenantal relationship between God and man, not to mention relationships among men. Thus we see throughout history that God spoke to His people in various ways, not just through the prophets. Much of what God said through the prophets was specific revelation for a particular time and place, which was therefore not inscripturated. But God also caused His Word to be written and preserved in Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit worked through chosen vessels, leading them to write what God intended (2 Pet. 1:19–21). The Bible as God’s written Word is an objectively recorded Word from God. Jesus refers to it as “Thy Truth” (John 17:17) and Paul tells us it was “inspired” (actually “God-breathed,” 2 Tim. 3:16).

As we pointed out earlier, the idea that God speaks to us is one of the basic distinctions between Christianity and most of the religions of the world. Consequently, the written word of Christian Scripture is fundamentally distinct from the ideas of holy writings in non-Christian religions. Even Judaism and Islam, which both claim to be based upon the Bible, cannot really attain a biblical view of revelation because they do not accept the idea of God as Three Persons who communicate by virtue of their perfect mutual indwelling.

A related aspect of revelation is also important. We referred above to the fact that Paul called the Word of God “inspired.” What do we mean by inspiration of Scripture? Without the biblical view of the Trinity, inspiration becomes nothing more than divine imposition of will on human subjects, as God overrules human freedom and selfhood in order to get his message through. In this case, human agency virtually disappears and man

becomes more like a mechanical instrument. (At times, God actually did dictate Scripture and the human author served mostly as a secretary, but dictation is not the primary means by which God gave Scripture.) In another version of nontrinitarian inspiration, God gives His word to a human author who tries to understand it. Then he writes what he believes God said, but because of human limitations, what he actually conveys is a compromised message at best. Both of these views of inspiration are wrong. A trinitarian approach opens the path to understanding, even though mystery remains.

When we consider the idea of conveying a message from God through a human author, we confront the problem of multiple authorship. The inspired product is both the word of man and the Word of God. How can that be possible? In a worldview where God is a monad, the idea of multiple authorship is an anomaly, a contradiction of the naked sovereignty of the monad. As we have seen, the absolute distance between the monad and the plurality of the creation makes it not only difficult to imagine why it would communicate, but also how it could communicate through a human partner. By contrast, the Bible teaches us that three Persons share their knowledge with one another in the fellowship of their mutual indwelling. The Father is in the Son and therefore the Son knows and reveals the Father (Jn. 1:18). The Spirit is one with the Father and the Son and therefore He knows the “deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). Rather than cancel out personality, mutual indwelling sustains and enhances it. Everything that God is and does, He is and does as One God in whom three mutually indwelling Persons cooperate in all that God does. God’s plan, therefore, has multiple authors. The trinitarian multiple “authorship” of God’s plan for the world stands behind the whole notion of the multiple authorship of Scripture.

**The trinitarian multiple “authorship” of God’s plan for the world stands behind the notion of the multiple authorship of Scripture.**

We cannot fully explain how it works, but we know that when the Holy Spirit indwells a man, He is able to become one with the man He leads to such a degree that their thoughts become one, while at the same time not diminishing the human person and his individual qualities. Quite the contrary—just as the Son is most perfectly the Son because He is the express image of the Father, so also a man under the inspiration of the Spirit is led



to be his best and truest self. He is able to enter into the mind of God by the indwelling of the Spirit. The mind and message of God become truly his as well, and what he writes is God's Word every bit as much as it is his own. The Spirit's indwelling and His special leading guarantee that the message is true, clear, and comprehensive. Add to this the fact that God in His wisdom endowed His chosen servants with unique gifts and personality traits and prepared them, through education and experience, to be able to write precisely the word God intended for them to write.

Finally, according to Paul, not only is the Word inspired, it is also "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). So saying that the Bible is true is not enough, for a word may be true but irrelevant or relevant only to a limited degree. But Paul says that the Bible equips us "for every good work." If God is the Creator of the world and if He created all things by His Word, then His Word has inherent and comprehensive relevance. God's revelation in Scripture, in other words, is not alone. It must be taken together with His revelation in the creation and through history. These three forms of revelation (person/creation, word, deeds/history) constitute a coherent whole, a network of infinitely complex links and relations. Every thread in the web of Truth ties into every other thread to form the whole. No form of revelation stands by itself. Each depends on the others. But the Word has a certain priority. It is the key that unlocks the secrets of the world, for it shows us through stories, poetry, law, letters, visions, and prophecy how all things relate to the Covenant Lord, our Father in heaven.

### *Spirit*

God also reveals Himself in deeds. In a general sense, every event in history is a revelation of God. Because of sin, however, not every event is a direct or simple manifestation of the kind of God He is. We cannot look at the preponderance of war in history, for example, and conclude that God loves war. What the Bible shows us instead is that when men forsake God and true worship, they turn to idols and fall into increasingly perverse folly, including war (Rom. 1:18–32). The pervasiveness of conflict in man's history testifies to the fact that man has perverted what it means to be God's image. At the same time, ironically, war provides the setting for many of the



most inspiring displays of human love, self-sacrifice, devotion, and courage. Even in the midst of his grossest folly, man often displays a peculiar nobility.

God is revealed in history as the Spirit unfolds His plan. In the book of Daniel, for instance, the rise and fall of the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome were part of God's plan to bring the Messiah into the world. We are not to think that ancient China and the empires of South America were outside of His purposes simply because they bear no direct relationship to the Messiah. Nor are we to think there was no witness to the truth among them, for He always gave them a witness of Himself (Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:18 ff.).

The deeds in history that reveal God most clearly are the deeds of Christ Himself. From His virgin birth to His resurrection, Jesus' life was full of extraordinary manifestations of divine power. His deeds manifested the Father and demonstrated that He was the only-begotten Son of God. His deeds also show us the way of life, for they reveal truth. What is true of Jesus' miracles in particular is true of history in general. All creation is a symbol of God and all history manifests God. In the biblical perspective, God the Spirit is at work in all of history, revealing the manifold glory of God. When we are considering the revealing work of the Spirit, the difference between our daily routines, spectacular historical events, and the miracles of Jesus is one of degree more than one of kind.

## Understanding God's Revelation

We have emphasized from the beginning that the Christian worldview is a revealed worldview, for the heart of the Christian worldview is the Trinity, a truth that can be known only through God's revelation. The Christian worldview also teaches us that we live in a world that reveals God, a world that everywhere manifests His glory and does it so abundantly that all can see it clearly (Rom. 1:18–21). Though men may claim that they do not know or cannot understand, the Bible pronounces them "without excuse." Their ignorance, in other words, is willful blindness for which they are morally accountable. Just as men deny the clarity of the revelation of God in the creation or in history, they assert that the Bible does not really constitute revelation since the Bible's message can be made to mean anything that the

interpreter wants it to mean. Controversy about the teaching of the Bible continues even to this day. How can the Christian claim that God has given us a perspicuous statement of His will?

The answer, in part, lies in looking at the matter of differing interpretations from a broader perspective. The more we look at the details, the more disparity seems to appear, but when we step back and consider things at the worldview level, the disagreement among Christians is much less significant than we might think. Trinitarianism unites Christians of various traditions in the confession of the central and most important issue of theology and worldview. Twentieth-century Christians from countries as diverse as the United States, India, and Russia read works by the Africans Tertullian and Augustine, the Italian Thomas Aquinas, the German Martin Luther, the Frenchman John Calvin, or the Englishman John Wesley. We may disagree with some things these men say, but we know that we are reading people who believe in and worship the same God. They believe that the triune God is the only true God, that the Father created the world, that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin and died for the sins of men so that those who believe in Him might be saved, that He rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of God, and that He will return at the end of history to judge all men. They believe in the Holy Spirit and in His work in history to glorify the Father and the Son. To agree in all of this is to agree on the fundamentals of a worldview., or to say the same thing in different words, the Apostles' Creed is a worldview confession. That all branches of orthodox Christians—Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox—agree on the Apostles' Creed demonstrates the basic unity of all Christians, a unity based upon Scriptural revelation. The unity of Christian confession, moreover, immeasurably surpasses that of world religions like Buddhism and Hinduism.

**The indwelling Spirit enables us to understand the Word.**

When we understand the broader unity of those who embrace the Apostles' Creed, we can address the matter of interpretation. For God's revelation does need to be interpreted and applied to life. Since Christians believe that God communicates to us so that we can understand, enjoy, and gain wisdom from His truth, we must be able to explain how it is possible for a twenty-first-century believer to really understand the writings of a Hebrew prophet from the tenth century B.C. We must be able to explain how



our modern translations of the Bible can truly represent the thinking of these ancient men from different cultures, with different customs, political structures, art forms, and lifestyles.

The full answer to these questions would require a book in itself, but the basic answer is trinitarian. The God who spoke the Word did not speak in vain and He will not allow His Word to fail. It comes to us as a living and powerful Word, like the Word that God spoke when He said, "Let there be light!" Paul tells us that the Word is able to "discern the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12) so that it speaks to the very depths of our being in a way that no other book can. Just as the Word of God has a special power to reach the hidden recesses of the human soul, it is also uniquely able to bring us into the presence of God Himself. Scripture does not just give us information or teach us *about* God. The preaching of the Gospel of Christ transforms men because of the very presence of God in His Word: "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6). The living Word, in spite of the imperfections of translation, brings us to Him.

Although it is important to stress that the Holy Spirit of God is always involved when the Father speaks the Word, that is not enough. The work of the Spirit is not solely confined to the objective aspects of revelation such as creating the Word as an objective book of truth. He also works subjectively in the hearts of men who hear, so that the Word will communicate the truth. The Spirit is not merely whispering in our ears. He dwells within us to teach us in ways we cannot comprehend. The internal witness of the Spirit ensures that the Word will not remain merely objective truth or cold doctrine—outside of us and distant—but that it will actually enter our hearts and bring us to the Father. The indwelling Spirit enables us to understand the Word and brings us into the presence of the Father. Person, Word, and Spirit must come to us together or we will not understand God's revelation in Scripture.

To state this from a different perspective, our response to Scripture must be in accord with the nature of Scripture. The Bible is not simply an instruction manual in wise living. It is the book that brings us into a covenant relationship with God. Our response to the written word is a response to the author. Unless we respond to Him, the written text may become a



mere book to us. "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. . . . If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (Jn. 14:21, 23). Only when the Spirit of God dwells in us does He bring an internal witness and testimony. He manifests Jesus to us so that we grow in our relationship and fellowship with God.

None of this is to deny that the Bible is indeed a book and to a large degree it is to be interpreted in the same way that we interpret any other book. But since it comes to us as a covenantal Word, it asserts authority over us and demands that our thinking and daily life conform to its truth. It is a personal word, revealing the heart and mind of our heavenly Father. Therefore, biblical interpretation must not be reduced to a technique, applying rules of interpretation to get the right results. Personal knowledge and a close relationship to God inform the man who loves Christ and obeys His Word, so that he is led to deeper insight and understanding as he thinks, studies, and prays. Our Father shares Himself with us through the Word by the indwelling Spirit. In God, the full knowledge of the trinitarian Persons is a reflection of their utter self-giving in mutual indwelling. Covenantal perichoresis means perfect communication, for the Speaker, the Spoken, and the Breath of God are One. Since the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity is so fundamental to their perfect mutual understanding, we should not be surprised that for man, the Spirit's covenantal indwelling and illumining work is essential for him to know God and the revelation He gives in Scripture.

But Scripture is only one aspect of God's revelation. We also have to understand the Word in relationship to other aspects of God's self-manifestation in the world and in history. The Person of God revealed in the symbolism of creation, and the mysterious working of God's Spirit in history, are planned from before the foundation of the world to be in harmony with the verbal revelation of God's Word. Also, our minds are designed to respond to every aspect of God's revelation. The processes of logical induction and deduction, the more ambiguous processes of discovering analogies and reasoning metaphorically, and the even more obscure processes of intuition all combine to enable us to understand God's Word, but only in the context of comprehensive covenantal revelation. Unless everything revealed

God, Scripture could not. But since everything does reveal God, we must apply the Scriptures to all of life.

Though we cannot yet see how all things cohere in the plan of God, we can be certain that the symbolic and mysterious manifestation of His presence in the world, the Word of Scripture, and His work in history harmonize perfectly. Nothing in the creation contradicts Scripture and nothing in history fails to manifest the God of the Bible. Since we are in the middle of the story, however, and not at the end, many things are not yet clear.

Finally, in the same way that individuals grow over time and learn through their relationship with God, Christ is also leading His Church by the Spirit so that over time she will grow in holiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Our lives are too short and our knowledge of the world too imperfect for us to see this generational growth through the lens of our own experience. But the Bible assures us that Jesus works in the Church to sanctify and perfect it. Through the Word and Spirit we were born into new life (1 Pet. 1:23; Jn. 3:5–8). Through the Word and Spirit we are sanctified (Jn. 17:17; 2 Thes. 2:13). Through the same Word and Spirit our eyes are opened to see the whole world as the symbol of God and the revelation of His goodness. In the same way the whole Church of Jesus Christ grows in understanding, love, and holiness over time as the Savior sanctifies and instructs His bride (Eph. 5:25–27).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that comparing revelations and holy books from different religions ultimately means comparing different ideas of God, for the basic questions of revelation—Why should God communicate? Why would He communicate by words?—are actually questions about the nature of God. Also, we have seen that the problem of interpretation is grounded in the question of God. The Christian view of God as a Trinity provides the basis for our understanding of who He is. We know that He is a God who communicates—communication is essential to His triune being. Verbal communication is only one aspect of God's self-revelation, but it is especially important because it is in the Word that we discern the meaning of other forms of revelation. The problem of interpretation is a problem for man because of the blindness of his sin, but the God of the covenant indwells us.



He surrounds us with the testimony of His greatness, power, and love in the world and opens our hearts to receive it.

Modern communication theorists argue about the relative importance for communication of the various factors involved in communication: the intention of the speaker, the meaning of the verbal utterance, and the receptor's interpretation. All three factors are obviously essential to true communication, but the unity necessary for true communication presupposes the trinitarian God. He is the one in whom intention (Person), utterance (Word), and reception (Spirit) perfectly cohere because the three Persons of God indwell one another. Because He has created man as His image, man too can communicate, though the sinfulness of man creates severe barriers to real communication apart from Christ.

Unique among the religions and worldviews of man, the Bible teaches of a trinitarian God who indwells man in covenantal oneness to lead man into the fellowship of love that characterizes the divine society. Our interpretation of God's truth cannot stray too far, for God is with those who love Him and keep His commandments. He not only speaks the Word, He explains it to us from the inside. The Spirit leads us to see how the connections between the symbolism of creation, the written Word, and the truths of history and daily life, form analogies that open new (albeit old) avenues for understanding. Just as the mutual indwelling of the three Persons does not interfere with freedom and true personhood, but instead brings full and perfect mutual understanding, so also God's dwelling in us does not take away from our individuality. Rather it ensures that, through understanding His Word, we will grow and develop into fuller and better persons, more Christ-like in perfect love and goodness. This is His plan (Eph. 4:11 ff.) and it will not be thwarted, not even by the sin and folly of those who love Him.

## Review Questions

1. What are the basic questions we must answer to adequately consider the subject of revelation?
2. How do different non-Christian religions answer the question of God's self-revelation?



3. How do different non-Christian religions answer the question of revelation by words?
4. How do Christians answer the question of God's self-revelation through words?
5. What are the three basic modes of God's self-revelation?
6. What do we learn from the Gospel of John about the Father's communication to the Son?
7. What does it mean to speak of God revealing Himself as a Person?
8. How does the doctrine of the Trinity help us understand verbal revelation?
9. What does it mean to speak of God revealing Himself in deeds?
10. How do the various forms of revelation relate?
11. How can Christians claim that the Bible is a clear revelation?
12. How does the doctrine of the Trinity help us understand interpretation of the Bible?

## 6. Trinity and History: Beginnings

IT IS NOT uncommon to regard stories as mere illustrations or ornamentation for truth that can be stated in philosophical propositions. As a matter of fact, however, stories are more fundamental than any other form of worldview synthesis. Ancient men rarely attempted to communicate their worldviews in complicated chains of reasoning, and even in the modern world no philosophical perspective can be influential unless it can be converted into a narrative. We do not find formal systems of philosophy as such in many societies, but there is no tribe or group of people so backward or “primitive” that they do not possess stories. People who have no written language, who lack all the higher elements of culture and are savagely cruel, will still have stories—myths that tell how the world began and explain the place of the tribe in that world. Modern evolutionists, too, tell the story of the evolution of the world using sophisticated computer graphics and cinematic special effects to show children (and adults) the “true” story of the world. We should add that stories are no less vital to individual psychology than they are to societies. We understand ourselves and interpret our own pasts through stories because they are an essential aspect of the very hardware of the human being. Therefore, stories are the typical means for communicating worldviews.

In the modern West, especially in the United States, two competing stories vie for the right to define our world. One of them is the age-old story of the Bible. The other is the story of human evolution, first told as *scientific*

myth by Charles Darwin, but a part of religious and philosophical thinking from ancient times. In the modern world, the theory of evolution is usually a story of a hot “Big Bang” followed by the gradual cooling of the universe, after which the planets form and life emerges, gradually developing through stages up to the birth of the human species. After man became a distinct species, his own psychological and social life are said to have evolved as well. Societies that did not develop higher culture are examples of groups that, for one reason or another, ceased to evolve. By studying these groups, we are supposed to be learning the history of all human societies—for at one time, we were all supposedly at the same point. Also, by studying animal groups, we learn deep truth about human psychology, for we are also supposed to be closely related to the animals through a common ancestor. This story has profound practical significance. If our problems, social and psychological, genetic and behavioral, have their roots in our animal past, then the solutions are to be found through understanding our animal nature and overcoming its defects.

The biblical story is fundamentally different from evolution myth. The difference goes far beyond the simple fact that God initiated the creation. The whole drama of biblical revelation is the story of paradise lost and regained. In this biblical story, culture, language, and religion follow an entirely different course from what is commonly believed by people in our day. In contrast to the evolutionary view, the Bible recounts the story of a specific historical link between all ancient cultures and societies. It tells us of an ancient garden paradise that was lost. It does not urge us to return to that paradise, but to seek a heavenly city to come. In the biblical story, man did not gradually evolve from an animal past; he was created directly by God with no intermediate stages of development. Animals are not our biological cousins, though we are taught to look to the animals for wisdom. But it is to God we look to understand ourselves fully, for we are like Him. The story begins with God creating man as His image. At the center of biblical history is the story of the Messiah and what He has done to save the world.

**The whole drama of biblical revelation is the story of paradise lost and regained.**



## Elements of the Biblical Story

Like all good stories, the biblical story of redemption has an introduction, basic themes, a plot, and a climax. Seeing the biblical worldview in story form helps us understand the history of the world and our own place and purpose in it. The biblical story is also dangerous. It exposes the prevailing culture to criticism and subverts elements in the modern perspective that are contrary to the biblical worldview. Just as Jesus' stories infuriated the Pharisees, the stories of the Bible tend to frustrate modern men and offend their cultural sensibilities. Consider, for example, the parable Jesus told the Pharisees about two sons.

But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, "Son, go, work today in my vineyard." He answered and said, "I will not," but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, "I go, sir," but he did not go. (Mt. 21:28–30)

He asked the Pharisees which of the two sons did the father's will and they answered, "The first." Jesus then explained the story.

Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him. (Mt. 21:31–32)

Here is a simple story that exposes the Pharisees for what they really were—self-righteous hypocrites. The parable sounded innocent enough at first and the Pharisees answered Jesus' question without hesitation. But when Jesus explained the story, the Pharisees were publicly undressed. The hated tax collectors and despised harlots were closer to the kingdom than the religious leaders! How can such a thing be? People from the "underclass" had responded to the message of John the Baptist and repented. The Pharisees, by contrast, detested both the message of John and the repentance of the common people who respected him.

Jesus' story presented a completely different perspective on what is important, what is truly real, and whom it is that God loves. Hearers who accepted Jesus' story as true were freed from the spiritual hegemony of the

Pharisees, even if they still had to obey them in the practical affairs of life (Mt. 23:1–4). In the same way, believing the biblical story today reorients our lives and sets us apart from the dominant, anti-Christian culture. We are freed from the world's message and the power structures that enforce it. But we are not at liberty to do or think whatever we want. We must learn from the harlots and tax collectors who repented at John's message and turned to Jesus. They did not repent in words only, doing whatever they pleased when "the church service," so to speak, was over. They devoted their lives to Christ and lived by His Word. By going out into the field and doing what their Father commanded, their righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20).

## Introduction to the Biblical Story

The biblical story has an introduction, which, as in any well-written story, sets before the reader all the basic themes that will appear. In the introduction, we gain our first impressions of the major characters, learning something about their concerns and the major themes of the ensuing story. All of this and more appears in the first three chapters of the Bible, which recount the story of the beginning. Here we learn how our world came to be, what its meaning and purpose are, and why it is the way it is. History's dominant themes are introduced, along with the three major characters—God, man, and the devil. How God Himself is revealed has been the focus of our chapters on creation and revelation. We now turn our attention to the story of man and his world.

### *The World*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and all the creatures and plant life that inhabit them. Man was the last creature, but his special dwelling place—Eden, the Garden of God—was not established until after man himself had been created. Eden is rightly called paradise, but even so, it was not what many think it was like. It was not merely a garden paradise where man had all the food that he needed, a comfortable environment, and an easy life—a view more like the Muslim idea of paradise in the world to come. Eden is not the long lost ideal world, and returning to Eden is not the goal of biblical history. Eden and the world around it represented



neither an ideal nor an end, but a beginning. To appreciate the meaning of the world into which Adam was placed, we should understand at least six important truths.

First, the world was created out of nothing and therefore had a beginning in time. The Christian worldview teaches an absolute distinction between the Creator and the creature. God is eternal. His creation is temporal. The second truth follows from this distinction: the world is wholly dependent upon God for its existence and sustenance. If God in His providence did not uphold the world, it would disappear into nonexistence. Third, the material, physical world is *good*. At the end of each day, God looked on what He had created and pronounced it good. In the Christian view, the physical world itself is holy, pure, and beautiful. Fourth, the world as created was

**The beauty of the Garden of Eden was the beauty of God's sanctuary.** perfect in the sense that it was undefiled, but it was not perfect in the sense of being fully developed. A child just out of his mother's womb may be a perfect baby, but

it is still a baby. Even so, the world that God created was a perfect, but immature world, waiting for man to nurture it to its full historical destiny. This brings us to the fifth point, that the world was created for man, to be ruled by him. God prepared all things to be placed under the covenantal authority of His representative. Thus, next to God Himself, man is the central character in the biblical drama of history.

The sixth point overlaps the biblical picture of man in the first three chapters of Genesis. God created the world with beauty and function and the Garden of Eden was His dwelling place with man. There is everywhere an excess of beauty compared to function, strictly speaking. But beauty is functional in its own way because it expresses the glory of God (Ps. 19:1) and leads to the worship of God. This point is far more important than modern men realize. The beauty of the Garden of Eden was the beauty of God's sanctuary. Man was to share the Garden with God. It was the first temple, the most holy place in the original world. The Genesis story implies that the Garden was a mountaintop paradise, for the four great rivers flowed from Eden down through the whole world. We know that the Garden had walls and a gate, for after man fell into sin, Cherubim guarded the gate to prevent man from returning to the sanctuary. If we pay careful attention, we notice that the temple symbolism in the rest of the Bible finds its roots in



the story of the Garden. The glory and beauty of Eden, then, was specifically intended to enhance man's enjoyment of the presence of God in His garden-sanctuary. The garden-as-sanctuary theme is central to Scripture, for man was created to dwell with God.<sup>1</sup>

### *Man*

The significance of the sanctuary for the Christian worldview cannot be overestimated. Much of the story of history in the Bible centers on the restoration of a sanctuary where God can dwell with man. But our concern now is with the meaning of sanctuary for man himself. First, the Genesis account shows us man not as *homo sapiens* but as *homo adorans*. Man was created to worship God and have covenantal fellowship with Him in the Garden, to live in a sanctuary in which he would enjoy God's presence. We see something of what this means in the prayer of David:

One thing I have desired of the LORD,  
That will I seek;  
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
All the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the LORD,  
And to inquire in His temple. (Ps. 27:4)

For David to dwell in the house of God—to live in the temple—is to behold the beauty of God and to pray unto Him.<sup>2</sup> Worship in the Bible involves the whole body and soul in song, dance, prayer, and feasting—the body and the soul. God tells the people of Israel to come before Him and rejoice (Lev. 23:40; Deut. 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11, 14–15; 26:11; 27:7; etc.). This is not a call to the grim and somber activity that some consider worship to be. Nor is it a secondary activity, something we do when our schedule allows—when there is no golf, or football, or company coming for dinner. To the contrary, worship is the most essential activity of man. It is what he was created to do. In worship, man comes face to face with the

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller study of the Garden of Eden and its symbolism, as well as its meaning for the Christian worldview, see James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes*, and Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name*.

<sup>2</sup> Note that when David wrote this, the temple was not yet built. He is obviously thinking in terms of the symbolism and meaning of the temple, not an actual building.

eternal God. He has fellowship and communion with the Infinite One. All of man's deepest desires for life, for blessing, for knowledge, and for glory meet their highest and most holy expression in true worship. When man does not worship, he denies a fundamental aspect of his humanity. He degrades his spirit and starves his soul.

Second, we see in the creation narrative that man was created as a single race. All humanity is a single race "in Adam" and from Adam, who is the original man, the father of us all. Our common ancestry in Adam is the basis for the covenantal unity of the human race. It is the reason that Adam's representative work in the Garden had such profound impact on all men. As much as some may dislike and deny the fact of representation by Adam, representation itself continues to be an inescapable reality of life. If leaders of a government make a decision, it affects all those they represent, whether for good or ill. We can change our political representatives by voting new ones into office, or we can move to a different country where we think the political climate is better, but either way we are still subject to representation. Of course, Adam's representation is more basic than that of political leaders. Adam is the father of mankind. To be human is to be his child. We cannot pick a new Adam or transfer our membership to another species.

**Worship is the most essential activity of man.**

Another aspect of man's racial unity is the family structure that God granted from the beginning. As a race, man was ordained to grow and increase in monogamous families. God created one man, and through the man, one woman to be his wife. All others are their children, members of the one family of man. This is the paradigm of male and female relationships. A man has one mother, many sisters, and one wife. A woman has one father, many brothers, and one husband. Sexual relationships are restricted to marriage. Sex is holy because it is set apart. It is not the common property of all, but a special relationship in the context of husband and wife only, ordained to express the total self-giving of marital love.

The third truth that the biblical story of man's creation makes clear is that man was created for a purpose. God commissioned man to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and have dominion over all (Gen. 1:26–28). It is clear from the context of God's six days of work and one day of rest that man was to imitate God. The world was originally without light, empty, and



without form (Gen. 1:2). During the first six days, God gave the light and formed the earth and created all living things, and gave the world its form, but still the earth was not “full.” It remained for man to bring creation to maturity by imitating God’s pattern of work and rest. Man was to rule the creation in the way a farmer rules his land, not as a plunderer who rapes and pillages, but as a husbandman who nurtures the land so that it might produce glorious and beautiful harvests that bring joy to God and man. That man was created with a purpose is important, for it means that man lives with a vision. We do not yearn for the past. We will not find our true paradise there. Our aiming and striving are for the paradise yet to come, for we are called to build the garden city of the future, the New Jerusalem.

Fourth, man was created good and holy. The human race is not intrinsically evil. Neither the body nor the fact of man’s finiteness provokes us to do ill. The Bible teaches that Adam was righteous if not mature. Then how did evil come into the world? This is a fundamental worldview question. The Bible answers with the story of the fall of man. In this story, evil is not a “thing”; it is not something that “exists.” What Adam was supposed to have learned through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and what we are supposed to understand through the story of the fall of Adam is that the words *evil* and *good* are words of relation. A right relationship to God is the essence of good and a wrong relationship to God is the essence of evil. In order for Adam to become mature, for him to be not just good but confirmed in goodness, he had to make an intelligent choice of the good.

Herein we see the meaning of the test in the Garden of Eden. God did not set a trap for Adam’s ruination. The command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a test similar to the one God gave to Adam before the creation of Eve. In that first test, God commanded Adam to name the animals. Adam did not simply number the animals or assign nonsense syllables to them; he gave the animals names that expressed their very nature (Gen. 2:19). Through passing that test, Adam learned the radical bio-cultural differences between himself and the animal creation, and was thereby psychologically and spiritually prepared for marriage to Eve. In the same way, the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was given for educational reasons. Adam was not yet morally mature; therefore he could not partake of the tree that symbolized moral maturity. Though



he was good by nature, he did not yet understand the nature of good and evil, nor was his goodness confirmed by his own positive moral choice. The serpent's questions should have opened Adam's eyes to the truth. The serpent attacked God's love and goodness, suggesting that God feared the freedom and blessing that Adam would enjoy through the knowledge of good and evil. Even before Eve took the fruit into her hand, Adam had swallowed Satan's lie. According to the Apostle Paul, she was deceived but Adam was not. Adam allowed her to eat and watched to see what would happen—mankind's first scientific experiment. When Adam saw that nothing happened to her, he ate of the fruit also.

The story of the Fall illustrates the nature of sin. Adam's lust—whether it be understood as sexual lust, or lust for power, knowledge, or glory—was not the primary issue. The beginning of Adam's sin was unbelief. He accepted Satan's lie about God. Satan accused God of being selfish and unloving, thereby revealing his own antipathy toward God. Unbelief is hatred of God. Paul referred precisely to this attitude when he wrote: "The mind of the flesh [i.e., 'old nature,' not 'body'] is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). Man willfully sets himself against God, primarily a matter of spirit, not a matter of his physical body. Satan is a fallen angel with no physical appetites to satisfy. The body, therefore, is not the source of our errors. Rather, it is the heart that misleads the hand.

After the Fall, man becomes a more psychologically complex creature. On the one hand, he is still the image of God. He still seeks Him, as he seeks eternity, infinity, glory, and truth. Even while seeking God, however, he also hates Him and flees from every manifestation of His glory and goodness. Because man is at enmity with God, he is also at odds with himself, for the reflection of the true God is stamped on every man's soul. To be at enmity with God is also to be at enmity with society, for man images God as groups, societies, and the race as a whole. In simple terms, because he loves and hates God, man also loves and hates himself, loves and hates the human race, and loves and hates the rest of creation.

**The beginning of Adam's sin was unbelief.**

The story of the Fall leads to the fifth and final truth we need to emphasize here. From the Fall to the end of time, the history of man is the story of a spiritual war. When man fell into sin, God called him to account. Adam blamed his sin on Eve; Eve blamed hers on the serpent. Eve was

deceived, both were guilty. But God was gracious. He pronounced judgment on the serpent but promised mercy for man.

I will put enmity between thee and the woman,  
and between thy seed and her seed:  
he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. (Gen 3:15)

From this moment on in the biblical story, mankind is divided. The seed of the serpent follows the way of the serpent, envying and hating God, denying His goodness and love. The seed of the woman repents and trusts in God's mercy. The very first story of man after the fall, the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), shows the two seeds in stark contrast and illustrates the enmity between them. The story is archetypal and paradigmatic, revealing not only the human heart but the history of man as well.

History has a greater story to tell, a story with much deeper meaning and significance. The seed of the woman is also a prophecy of a Great Seed who will defeat the devil and destroy his works. He will also redeem His people and shower them with the spoils of victory. The biblical history of man is the drama of this great redemption. The warfare between these two kingdoms focuses on the seed of the woman, the Messiah, whose heel is bruised though He Himself crushes the head of the serpent. In the biblical drama from the Fall onward, everything anticipates and looks forward to the coming of the One who will bring salvation to the world.

## Many Stories, One Story

The prophecy of the Messiah and the anticipation of God's saving work gives unity to the biblical story. From Genesis chapter 3 onward, man waits and longs for the Savior. In this sense, the biblical story is one story, but it is also many stories, each with its own special problems, its own heroes and villains. If we do not understand how the One and the Many relate, the Bible may appear to be a mere collection of tales, an anthology with no unifying theme. Upon reflection, however, we understand how the many stories are versions of the one story, and the one story provides the template for the rest. The one story itself is multidimensional, comprising a plurality of themes that find their unity and multiplicity in the person of Christ Himself.



We need to consider in more detail the multiplex nature of the Bible. It is not difficult to understand what it means to say that the biblical story is many stories. Everyone is familiar with the fact that the Bible tells stories about the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt, conquering Canaan, developing as a nation, and eventually coming under God's judgment in the days of the prophets. We know that the story of Israel begins with the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We also know that the Bible gives a great deal of attention to heroes of the faith—Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel and too many others even to list. No doubt, the Bible is a book of *stories*. But what does it mean to say that these are all *one* story?

Beginning after the Fall with the promise that Eve's seed would crush the serpent's head, the whole focus of Scripture is on the coming One. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are important because God promised that through them

**The many stories are versions of the one story, and the one story provides the template for the rest.**

the Messiah would come. The history of Israel is important because she was the vehicle through which God would preserve the sacred line of the Savior. The figures of Moses, Aaron, and David are important because the

Messiah, as the Anointed One, is the fulfillment of their individual roles of prophet, priest, and king. All the stories of the heroes of the faith foreshadow the one true Hero, Jesus Christ Himself.

Some of the Old Testament stories foreshadow the coming Messiah more specifically so that it is easy to see the one-story pattern. Take the story of Joseph, for example. His brothers hated him because of his special relationship with his father. They envied him so much they conspired to get rid of him. God, however, raised him up from eventual death in an Egyptian prison and set him on a throne at Pharaoh's right hand. From this lofty throne, Joseph eventually was able to save his brothers. The story of Joseph is also the story of Jesus, as are all the other great stories of the Bible, even when they are not so obvious.

The Bible stories also serve to illustrate man's historical predicament and God's redeeming grace. Abraham went down to Egypt with his bride. There he was persecuted and nearly killed, but God saved him and delivered him with spoil. This paradigm is repeated in the story of Isaac in Philistia. Later, when Jacob flees from his brother Esau only to be persecuted by his own relative, Laban, God saves him from persecution and brings him out of the



land with great treasure. These stories of the three patriarchs are the story of the nation of Israel. She went into Egypt to escape the famine in the days of Jacob but was later put in bondage. God sent a savior, Moses, to deliver His children from the hands of Pharaoh. They came out of Egypt in great triumph, bringing the spoils of victory. The same story is told in the book of Samuel when the ark of God is taken into captivity in Philistia and again in the books of Kings and Chronicles when Israel falls into captivity to Assyria and Babylon. The common themes of these stories—themes of fall, captivity, grace, and salvation—all combine to form the overarching story of man.

The problem with each old covenant story of redemption is that the sin of Adam so dominates man that however promising the beginning seems to be, it is not long before we read of another fall. A case in point is Solomon, a great king who reigned with wisdom and glory. He built the temple of God and brought the world to the verge of an age of untold blessing, but this wise king married pagan women who turned his heart to idolatry, bringing down his whole kingdom in the days of his son. Like Adam, Solomon fell and lost the Garden.

The spiritual warfare between the kingdom of the serpent and the kingdom of Christ includes every dimension of the kingdom introduced in Eden. The serpent attacked the bride (Gen. 12). He undermined the kingdom (1 Kgs. 11:1–8). He led astray the priests and ruined the temple (1 Sam. 2:12 ff.; Ezek. 8:6 ff.). There was war over the composition of the holy family (Ezra 9–10). Throughout the Old Covenant era, the specter of Adam's fall haunted God's people. They needed a new Adam, someone greater than Solomon, someone who could establish a new covenant. This would require a new creation and a new people of God united under a new covenant head. Obviously the people of Israel could not bring about such changes on their own. God intervenes to bring the biblical story to its climax in gift of Jesus.

Jesus had much in common with the biblical patriarchs and prophets before Him. His birth, like that of Isaac, Samson, and Samuel, was unusual. Like Joseph and Moses, He was hated and despised by his brothers and those who should have loved Him. His own people even put Him to death. But, unlike all the heroes and saviors of the Old Covenant era, Jesus resisted the devil. He did not fall when He was tempted. He was faithful unto death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, He was able to defeat sin and death,

rising from the dead and establishing a kingdom of righteousness. Now, He is seated at the right hand of God and all authority in heaven and on earth is His. Those who believe in Him become citizens in His kingdom and are saved from Pharaoh, Egypt, and Babylon—the kingdom of this world.

Jesus does not save His people in order to take them out of the world, however. Instead, He sends them into the world to transform it so that the Edenic commission can finally be accomplished through the work of a new race of men. This new race stands before God under a new covenant head. They worship in a new heavenly temple and seek a new, everlasting city. The basic themes introduced in the story of Eden find their ultimate realization in the New Jerusalem. The story of the Garden is the story of the creation of man as God's image and the gift of a commission to build God's kingdom. Covenantal headship, the temple-garden, marriage and family, and stewardship over the world are fulfilled in Christ and His Bride, the Church.

Thus, history in the Bible is the drama of redemption, the drama of the war between two kingdoms, ending in the victory of the New Covenant humanity. In the biblical view of history, the end is seen from the beginning (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 13:8). Causality in this drama runs in a fundamentally different direction than causality in the worldview of modern secular man. For modern man, all present reality is the result of past causes. The laws of chemistry and physics wholly determine the future or the future is altogether uncertain because random elements may affect the chain of causality in ways that are unpredictable and incomprehensible. In either case, causality is only in the past and present. In the biblical worldview, it is the future coming of the Messiah that dominates the flow of Old Covenant history. The nations of the world rise and fall to prepare the way for His coming (Dan. 7, etc.). Now that He has come, it is His goal, the realization of the New Jerusalem, which propels history onward. Thus, history flows backward from the future through the present and into the past. Causality is not only in the future, but the future is fundamental.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> To say that the future "causes" the present is a figurative way of speaking. It is not the future *per se* that is the cause, but God, who has a plan. He works in the present to lead it toward the future He intends. The point of emphasizing the future, however, is to help us realize that we should not simply look into the past to try to understand the present. God is often doing things for reasons we cannot possibly fathom because they lie in a future beyond our imagination.



## A Trinitarian Story

The biblical story is also trinitarian. In order to fully understand the book of Genesis, we must read it in the light of the Gospel and the fulfillment of history in Jesus Christ. The trinitarian themes of the first creation come fully into view when seen in the lens of the first creation. Man is created in the image of a *triune* God. When we consider the beginning in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity, we gain a better understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God.

### One and Many

Genesis tells us that God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26a). The use of plural language with reference to God is problematic to many. Is this a “plural of majesty” similar to the usage of the plural pronoun by the King of England, for example? Or is God addressing the angels, perhaps? Neither of these answers suffices. Man is not the image of God and the angels, but the image of God Himself. Moreover, angels are not a race, which seems to be an important aspect of man’s imaging God. Though a plural of majesty would not be inappropriate, there is not sufficient evidence to indicate it is a typical Hebrew usage. Though often dismissed out of hand, a trinitarian explanation at least deserves consideration.

The verse immediately following reads, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). Man was created as God’s image both as individual—“He created him”—and as a race—“He created them.” Every man as an individual is the image of God, but the human race as a whole also images God.

The latter aspect comes to concrete expression in all levels of human society. Families image God not as a collection of individuals, but as a social unity, a group whose oneness is *covenantal* because it is grounded in the covenant oath of marriage. It is also “ontological” in the sense that there is an obvious biological and genetic unity in the family. But the oneness of the family is not merely formal. There are depths of unity that we do not normally notice or think about until we look back and reflect on the way things



were. In a deep sense, what is experienced in the family is experienced at some level in almost every social group.

What the Genesis story is pointing to, in other words, is that man, like God, is both one and many. God is three Persons in one Being, so that His unity transcends and is fundamentally different from the unity of the human race. It is ontological as well as covenantal. God's threeness, too, is fuller and richer than human diversity could ever be. None of us as individuals is ever so fully individual as a Person of the Trinity. But that is what we should expect—we are only the image of God, not His exact representation. We are also like Him because, as a race, we image both the plurality and unity of God. We are individuals who can become our true selves only in the relationships we have in social groups. Ultimately, in Christ, Christians comprise a single new race.

### *Homo Adorans*

Man images the trinitarian nature of God in other respects, too. We have already seen that man is *homo adorans*, one created for worship. How does this relate to the idea of man as image? How does the fact that man worships reflect God Himself? Of course, it would be perfectly legitimate to define “worship” as a relationship that can exist only between creature and Creator, but that definition is not necessary and might even be misleading, for we shall see that one of the central and distinguishing aspects of Christian worship appears clearly in the relationships among the trinitarian persons. With the coming of Christ and the revelation of the Trinity, we learn that human worship is an analogy of trinitarian fellowship, but because it is an analogy enacted in the sphere of the human relationship with God, it naturally has its own distinct aspects.

**Man was created as God's image both as individual and as a race.**

What is this trinitarian fellowship? As the Gospels repeatedly show us, the Son seeks the glory of the Father. Moreover, they are clearly speaking of something more than Jesus' human relationship to God the Father. For the Father, too, seeks the glory of the Son, as does the Spirit when He comes into the world. Both the Father and the Son revere the Spirit and honor His name, for all blasphemy may be forgiven, except the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:31). The one who comes last is treated as the first.

Because God is the kind of God in whom the three Persons seek each other's glory and honor, so the human race was created to worship God and seek His glory and honor. In worship, we imitate trinitarian fellowship at a creaturely level. That this has profound meaning for the Christian worldview can be seen when we contrast Christian worship to that of other religious worldviews. Take, for example, another monotheistic religion commonly thought to be close to Christianity. In Islam, when man seeks God's glory, he does something wholly unlike what Allah himself would ever do. Allah would never bow to another or uphold another. When the Muslim bows before Allah—at that very moment when he is supposed to be the closest—

**In worship, we imitate trinitarian fellowship at a creaturely level.**

he is most unlike and farthest from the nature and being of his god. But when a Christian bows down to the Father and praises His Holy Name, he is not only closest to God by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the Church, he is also in special fellowship with the Trinity, reflecting in his own creaturely action something essentially similar to the relationship that the Persons of God share in eternity. Indeed, since worship is offered to the Father, in the name of Christ and by the power of the Spirit, it is participation in trinitarian fellowship. God not only receives our worship, He works in it and through it, thus constituting it truly Christian.

This means that Christian worship has implications for our relationships with other men as well. Righteously seeking the honor and blessing of other people is an aspect of biblical love and an imitation of the Trinity in our daily lives. No other religion or worldview is capable of expressing, much less teaching, this truth. Only in biblical religion can the worship of God and the love expressed in our daily lives be related to the nature of God Himself because only in biblical religion is worship an extension of the eternal fellowship of the triune God.

## Work

Work is basic to the Christian worldview. The Bible begins with God working six days and resting one, setting a pattern for human life and society but, more importantly, revealing what kind of a God He truly is. God is a God who works, and all His work is emphatically trinitarian. The Father created



the world through the Son, while the Spirit hovered over the waters. As we saw previously, the Father also created the world *for* the Son, who works to glorify the creation by the power of the Spirit. Finally the Son presents the completed work to the Father. The Persons of the Trinity work *with* each other, *for* each other, and *through* each other.

But why does God work at all? Work is not essential to His life, as if He would not have food to eat if He did not work. What is work for God? The answer is that God works because He delights in it. It is the joy of trinitarian fellowship. God works even though it is not necessary because the Persons of the Trinity enjoy working together. The words “play” and “fun” are too light to adequately express the truth that God is a God of joy, but they do point to important aspects of human life where man images God. Play and fun are not only forms of recreation and relaxation, they can also describe our attitude toward work. If man had not sinned, our work would not be cursed. Work would be a different form of “play”—as, indeed, it already is, by the grace of God, for many people in advanced nations, where men or women can choose work they enjoy and devote themselves to their jobs because they derive a sense of fulfillment from them.

**In good works, we image the trinitarian life of God by working with and for one another.**

The essence of work is *mutual service*. Jesus gave us a basic principle of social and economic life when He taught that he who would be greatest must be the servant of all. In this, He was pointing to the principle of His own life, for He came not to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:42–45). His example of selfless service expresses the true nature of work. God has called us to serve one another and to seek mutual blessing through our labor. The Holy Spirit has given each of us gifts to exercise for the good of all (1 Cor. 12). Man as worker expresses the trinitarian life of the God who works: “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” (John 5:17). In particular, God has called us to work and labor for His kingdom and glory, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

In these good works, we image the trinitarian life of God by working with one another and for one another. True Christian work is not performed in a vacuum, which is to say that all work deserving the name “good” is



inherently trinitarian in character and inescapably social. We learn to work from others as we watch them work or as they teach us something. We learn that work usually involves some form of cooperation with other people and usually depends upon their input before it can be completed. We work *for* others, too, in more ways than one. When we provide products for the market, we are working for all those who buy our product. In a different sense, we are working for our families. Work, therefore, is always an other-directed and social activity.

In working righteously, we also have special fellowship with God. When the Bible says we have been called to work for Him, it means that our works have their ultimate aims in Him. And when it teaches we are to work with Him, we are reminded that our works must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit to be truly good. Finally, our future resurrection guarantees that our labor in the Lord cannot be in vain (I Cor. 15:58).

## Rule

Rule is another aspect of man as God's image that may not appear at first to be trinitarian. Upon consideration, however, the connection is obvious. We need only remember that the Gospels speak of the Father sending the Son and the Son sending the Spirit. The hierarchy in the personal relationships of the Trinity is mirrored in the hierarchy of life in creation. Not all things are created equal. Man is set at the top of all God's creatures, lord and king over the whole world. Among men, too, there is hierarchy. Nations, tribes, groups, families, and other types of human organization all have their rules, both formal and informal, that define how their leaders are chosen and how the members relate to each other. Even informal groups and casual gatherings tend to a natural expression of hierarchy, however multifaceted and dynamic it may be.

Human sin, however, has perverted the notion of rule to such a degree that the very word *rule* is offensive to some. It signifies oppression. The idea of hierarchy is considered antithetical to good human relationships. What we really need, we are told, is "equality." There should be no dichotomy between hierarchy and equality among men, because they are not in tension in God. It is because of sin that equality and hierarchy in human relationships come into conflict. In the story of creation—before man sinned—we

find the proper perspective on rule, one that illumines the notion of authority and hierarchy in God as well.

In Genesis we read, "Then the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Where the King James Version translates "dress" modern versions use such words as "tend" or "cultivate." These translations are not wrong in context, but it is important for the reader to know that the Hebrew word in the original is "serve." Adam was to serve the Garden. What does *serve* mean? Practically speaking, it means "tend" or "cultivate." But the word *serve* points to the essence of leadership and rule in the Bible. The ruler is the one who serves others, as we saw above in the teaching of Jesus. Rule and authority mean responsibility before God, for our rule is always under His rule. We are to rule in the sense that we are to "serve the garden" that God has given us. In serving the garden, we serve Him and our fellow man. For the Father "rules" the Son only *for* the Son, in order to bless and glorify Him. The Son and the Spirit submit to the rule of the Father because they love the Father. Rule and authority among men as well as man's rule over the rest of creation were designed to be a form of service for the blessing of all.

## The Trinity and Evil

Evil is also an important part of the Bible's story. Many consider it the most difficult part of the story to accept. Non-Christians often object to Christianity because of the existence of evil. If God is so good, why does evil exist? Why did He create it? Ironically, proponents of the problem of evil as a refutation of Christianity inadvertently trivialize their own objection. They believe in a world that evolved by chance where the "evil" that upsets them so much has no real definition, meaning, or solution. After all, in the evolutionary worldview, man is an animal who has come to his present position by a cosmic accident. Whatever he does is simply an expression of his nature, no more worthy of ethical condemnation than the actions of a lion or a dog. At best, ethics is a collection of racial choices for survival, imposed upon societies by a power elite. But there is no guarantee that the elite, the ones making the final decisions, make the right decisions or that what they proclaim to be good and evil are really for the long-term good of the race. The social rebel or outcast may be the harbinger of the future and a savior.



Evil is very real for the Christian, however, and also painful and horrible. There is mystery in evil, as in all things, but we are not left to ponder in despair. Evil has a meaning and a solution. Part of the Christian answer to the problem of evil is found in the observation that, from a Christian perspective, evil does not literally “exist.” That is, evil is not a created thing. Evil is something very different from what most people imagine. In order to understand why there is evil in the world and what it means, we must understand the relationship between evil and the Trinity.

To begin with, evil is only possible for persons. (The fact that angels are charged with sin indicates that at least in some sense, they are also God’s image, though not exactly in the same sense men are.) Dogs may be disobedient and some cows or pigs may be meaner than others, but animals are not charged with sin. There is no moral judgment against “bad” animals. To say, however, that evil is only possible for persons is to make the kind of distinction between man and animal the Bible demands and evolution, in principle, resists. But exactly what *is* evil?

Evil is an improper relationship with God. All we call morally wrong is primarily sin against God himself. Because the word *evil* describes a particular kind of relationship, it is not an entity. And because *evil* is a word defining a particular kind of relationship, we also have to say creating man in God’s image entailed the possibility of evil, for man could not be the image of God if he did not have true moral freedom. For man to be truly good, he must choose the good out of love for God. The test with the serpent confronted man with moral choice.

**Because the word *evil* describes a particular kind of relationship, it is not an entity.**

In God, the possibility of evil does not exist because God is love, and the three Persons of the Trinity have never been morally immature. The choice of loving the others is an eternal choice essential to the being of God and to the definition of the Persons themselves. Therefore, they can relate to one another only in love and truth. If, however, we imagine the impossible—the Persons in God not loving each another—we can see what we might call the trinitarian background for evil. The very idea of relationship includes the abstract possibility of a perverse relationship, that is, we can imagine such a relationship. For man to be created in God’s image—like God in a very real sense, though of course, separated from God by the infinite ontological gap



that divides Creator from creature—including the fact that man is a person in relationship to God. In that sense, man is a person like the Persons of the Trinity, but a contingent person, a mere image of the true Persons. What we can imagine only in the abstract when we think of God is a real possibility for man. The Persons of the Trinity cannot violate their mutual love, but man can betray God. One might even say that for man to have the choice to relate wrongly was essential. For man to be mature, to be a person who self-consciously loves God, he had to be given the opportunity to make a mature decision to follow love and truth. But this includes the opposite possibility also.

Thus, creating man in the image of the triune God entails the possibility of evil, for the free man may choose to rebel against God. Since God is man's psychological center and social gyroscope, the choice to rebel had consequences that extended far beyond strictly religious and moral implications. Not relating rightly to God means not relating rightly to His image, whether ourselves or others. It also means not relating rightly to His creation. The perversion of the most fundamental relationship results ineluctably in the perversion of all relationships. We also must add that the choice to rebel against God robbed Adam of his freedom as well. Freedom only exists in living for God and as the creatures He created us to be. If Adam had chosen to obey God, he would have confirmed himself in freedom. Instead, both he and his descendents fell into bondage.

Satan's temptation in the Garden illustrates the essential issue. Man was created to worship God and submit lovingly and whole heartedly to Him. But Satan proposed that Adam could be his own god, deciding good and evil for himself.<sup>4</sup> When men truly worship God, they fit into the proper place in the divine scheme—*under* God *with* one another and *over* the world. When man exalts himself over God, he loses his place in the world and is no longer able to conform to the Truth. He must manufacture his own truth, deciding good and evil for himself. What then? This would-be god finds that not being omnipotent or omniscient is a severe handicap. He must compete with other would-be gods who do not always want to acknowledge his divinity. The result is that the world becomes mysterious. Though the

<sup>4</sup> The words in Genesis are "knowing good and evil," but the word *know* here may be used in a wide sense, as it often is in Scripture, including much more than mere cognition.

world testifies to its Creator, man can no longer hear the clarion call of God. The symphony of creation sounds like cacophony to sinful man's ears.

Remarkably, non-Christian religions tend to offer the problem itself as the solution. Buddhism teaches that the essence of enlightenment is the realization that one is a god and promises the faithful that they will become gods (though "god" has its own special meaning in the pantheistic context). Mormonism, too, has its own peculiar version of salvation as deification. Even the secular evolutionist aims at a godlike state. The evolutionist's proud pretence is disguised in part by the apparently humble assumption of a place with the animals. But man is the only animal with self-consciousness. This gives man the right and the responsibility to decide good and evil for himself. There is no higher power or greater intelligence before whom man must bow the knee—though the "elite" tend to demand something like worship. In non-Christian religions and philosophy, then, we see the very essence of evil, the lust for self-deification masquerading as the quest for truth or salvation.

This does not solve the intellectual problems related to evil, but it does, perhaps, indicate how it is that evil is a meaningful possibility only in the world that was created by the triune God. On Christian premises, evil is a possibility because Adam was a person who was given the choice to love the Creator and live for His kingdom or to reject Him and attempt to create his own kingdom. In Christianity, evil has meaning and a solution.

In the worlds of non-Christians faiths, the problem of evil is unsolvable. A monad like the Muslim god cannot be the ultimate standard for relationships among persons because the whole notion of relationship is foreign to Allah. The existence of evil is an utter mystery, though it is simply part of the larger mystery of the existence of plurality. In pantheism, evil tends to be identified with plurality itself and the meaning of evil is denied. Salvation from plurality and evil is attained by a return to the One, a metaphysical salvation. Why the plural ever came into existence to begin with is beyond comprehension.

## Conclusion

A review of the beginnings of the biblical story already sets the biblical worldview squarely against much modern thought. The theory of evolution,



of course, contrasts sharply with the miraculous creation of the world in six days and man's special creation as the image of God. The story of Adam and Eve as the original family stands in stark, if implicit, opposition to all forms of racism, feminists' denial of different sexual roles for male and female, homosexuality, and polygamy, to name only a few areas in which contemporary thought clashes with the Christian worldview. Theories of man that see the basic problems of human life as psychological or sociological are undermined by the truth that man is *homo adorans* by nature, and that all of his problems trace their source to Adam's sin. Denying that the human body is good or asserting that our problems arise from our animal past also contradict the biblical narrative. The simple story of the creation of the world and man's place in it has profound implications for the way life should be lived. These unfold as the biblical story continues. To build our worldview in terms of the Bible's teaching requires us to stand firm against most of the thinking of our day, especially in the academy, where opposition to Christianity is deep and widespread.

The story of the Big Bang—in the West the “scientific” alternative to the biblical story, which posits initial conditions, an explosion, and a process of development, all enshrouded in unfathomable mystery—tells of a world of impersonal forces that by accident or by some deterministic formula produced the world we live in today. There is no special meaning in the big-bang world, no special purpose, and no explanation for the way things are, including all the misery and suffering of the world. What we see is what is, nothing more and nothing less. Why should men choose this view? Because of the inescapable demand of science? Hardly. Men choose to anchor their souls in the sands of nothingness and despair rather than turn to the God who created them. They are just what the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible shows us all to be, sinners who prefer their own false and empty hopes to the divine promise of eternal life through faith in the God of all grace.

The biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption is a story that exalts man above the animal kingdom and gives him the astonishing quality of godlikeness. Personhood makes evil possible, for persons have the power to choose, and Adam chose to pervert the covenant relationship. Because of man's sin, the history of the world includes profound tragedy, but the story of God's grace in redemption is the story of victory over tragedy. It is in-



deed the greatest story ever told. It is the story of the Son of God who became a man and died for our sins in order to save us from sin and the devil and remake us into a new covenant people. All who believe in Christ are new creatures, created for a new covenant in a new creation. The biblical story finds its climax in the story of the incarnation of God and the saving work of Jesus, which ushers in a new world, the kingdom of God.

## Review Questions

1. Why are stories important?
2. What are the competing stories in the West today?
3. What was the effect of Jesus' stories on the Pharisees?
4. What do we learn about the world in the introduction to the biblical story?
5. What do we learn about man through the story of creation?
6. What do we learn about man through the story of the Fall?
7. Show how the many stories of the Bible are one story of the Messiah.
8. What does it mean to say that mankind reflects the unity and diversity of God?
9. Explain the trinitarian significance of worship.
10. Explain the trinitarian significance of work.
11. Explain the trinitarian significance of rule.
12. Explain the differences between a trinitarian and a non-Christian view of evil.

## 7. Trinity and History: The Pivot

PAUL SAID that the Greeks seek wisdom and the Jews seek signs (I Cor. 1:22). Jesus was the wisest of men, wiser even than Solomon, and He performed enough miracles to fill a book (Jn. 21:25), but the Greeks rejected His wisdom and the Jews did not believe His signs. From the Jewish perspective, the cross invalidated the signs that Jesus was the Messiah. From the Greco-Roman perspective, crucifixion as a criminal meant that the Nazarene could not even be a great man, let alone Savior. But Paul preached a crucified Messiah as the Savior of the world.

In His own day, Jesus was reviled by the religious and political leaders and revered by the common people, even though they too turned against Him in the end. Some people believe that if Jesus came into the world today, He would be welcomed. Nothing could be further from the truth. He might even be less welcome today than He was in His own day, though for different reasons. What would modern intellectual and political leaders do with someone who performed miracles like Jesus did? What if this miracle-worker had a habit of saying things that embarrassed the powerful but invigorated and empowered the common man? What if He clearly believed the world was created by God and spoke about Noah as if he were a real historical figure? What if He accepted the Jewish worldview of the Old Testament as true and at the same time claimed He was equal with God? What if He said He was the only way for men to be saved, and that all other would-be saviors were false? What if He turned water into wine and sat

down to eat and drink with sinners? A man like Jesus would probably not fit well into a society of sinful man anywhere at any time.

From the modern perspective, the miracles of Jesus are particularly offensive. But His teachings, also, contain many elements that would have to be purged in order for Him to be accepted in our day. His claims about His special relationship with God and His dogmatic pronouncements about righteousness, sin, judgment, and hell are especially offensive and distasteful. Did Jesus really say all the things attributed to Him in the Gospels? Did He really mean them? Jesus was a nice guy who loved His neighbor, right? The Jesus in the Gospels is completely different from the modern idea of a savior, and the things He said are so comprehensively challenging to the modern (and postmodern) perspective, that it is extremely difficult for men in our day to know what to do with Him.

If we cannot really handle Him, why can we not simply ignore Him? This also presents a challenge. At the same time He offends us, He also haunts and attracts us. He says things that captivate even those who hate Him. And His impact on history is simply too great to ignore. The civilizations and cultures of most of the world have been influenced by Him to such a degree that we are all forced to admit there is an elephant in the living room. Thus, the offense of Jesus is counterbalanced by the undeniable nobility of His person and the impact of His presence here on earth. So then, rather than simply reject Jesus, the way of modern scholarship is to revise Him. The search for the “historical Jesus” and the so-called “critical” approaches to the Gospels are in reality attempts to force Jesus into the skeptics’ mold. Since modern scholars cannot tolerate the Jesus of the Gospels as He is, they trim a little here, stretch a little there, and behold—He fits the Procrustean bed perfectly! Or, at least, almost perfectly.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is that His miracles and teachings constitute a worldview-level challenge, confronting the whole idea of who man is and what his basic problems are. What do we do? Our options are really very limited. We must altogether deny Him, as atheists do, or significantly revise Him, as ancient Jews, medieval Muslims, and modern unbelieving scholars have done. Or we must believe in Him and change ourselves and our worldviews to fit His mold.

<sup>1</sup> Both the bed and the reconstructed image of Jesus have to be changed each generation. The “historical Jesus” of the critics is not the Jesus who lived in history. He is the Jesus who has been upgraded to fit our history.



## Miracles

Miracles are stumbling blocks to the contemporary mind. Liberal scholars and theologians would like to revise the Bible by removing embarrassing stories of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead or feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. But the “problem”—if that is the way we think of it—of biblical miracles goes much deeper. The incarnation of the Second Person of the Godhead is the central miracle of the Christian faith. Inseparably linked with it are the miracles of Jesus’ virgin birth, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension to the right hand of God. His crucifixion as a sacrifice for the sin of the world is so closely tied to the miracle of the resurrection that denial of the resurrection would nullify the biblical meaning of the cross. If miracles per se are the stumbling block, then no revision of the Christian narrative will be able to satisfy the objector. Miracles are not secondary to Christianity. Christianity is inescapably a religion of miracles, or, more properly, it is the religion of the miracle—the incarnation of God.

**Christianity is inescapably a religion of miracles.**

There are three basic questions about miracles and Christianity. First, are miracles possible? Second, did the miracles recorded in the Bible actually occur? Answer either of these questions in the negative and you deny Christianity. Philosophical arguments against the miracles of the Bible often address the first question and deny miracles are possible. In that case, Christianity, a religion of miracles, could not be true. Others may grant the possibility of the miraculous but deny the miracles of the Bible occurred. In this case also, Christianity could not be true. Obviously the Christian answers these questions in the affirmative. The important question for the Christian is the third one: What do the biblical miracles mean?

### Miracles and Worldview

This is not the place to address in detail the many philosophical and historical questions about miracles. The essential point is that one’s conception of miracles is bound up with one’s worldview. In a world without God, there are obviously no “miracles” in the Christian sense of the word. For the Christian, a true miracle is a work of God—which is to say, a Christian

cannot be satisfied with a “general” definition of miracle that leaves open the question of who is ultimately responsible for the inexplicable or the mysterious. Someone with a different worldview might object that the Christian definition is unfair in that it prejudices the case. But for Christians what are properly called miracles are always and only works of God. The doctrine of miracles is so bound up with our understanding of God that anything other than a theological definition of miracles would be tantamount to defining the word in a manner inconsistent with Christian faith. In other words, a Christian cannot speak about miracles without also speaking about the kind of God he believes in. The two ideas function together within an integrated whole so that the definition of miracles is necessarily a worldview issue also.

In addition to the complications that are involved in the problem of defining miracles, further complications arise from human psychology, imperfectly understood—or even utterly baffling—natural phenomena, fraud, and malevolent spirits. Delusion, hysteria, will power, self-deception, and all sorts of personal and individual psychological quirks are related to the problem of understanding apparently supernatural or unusual phenomena. The Christian historian is perfectly right to take into account the psychological aspects of reports of supernatural phenomena. We also must not ignore the fact that things happen which we cannot explain but which may be understood in the future. Any Christian theologian or historian attempting to offer a comprehensive theology of miracles would have to address concerns about human psychology and inexplicable natural phenomena.

A far more important issue, however, is the influence of evil spirits. This is an aspect of the discussion we must not forget. Belief in angels, including Satan and evil spirits, is as essential to Christian belief as the doctrine of sin. It is also profoundly relevant to the question of miracles. Angels and evil spirits are “supernatural” beings with influence and powers that defy our naturalistic science. They have power to do exceedingly strange and wonderful things. The Bible specifically addresses the matter of Satanic “miracles” and tells us that Satan’s “miracles” and God’s miracles are not always distinguishable on the surface (Mt. 24:24).

In addition to these issues, we must distinguish true miracles from fake miracles and other frauds perpetrated by various and sundry “faith healers,” charlatans, and religious hucksters. Even some of these may prove difficult



to discern. But just as the existence of a counterfeit dollar does not disprove the existence of true dollars, the existence of demonic miracles and counterfeit miracles—even an abundance of counterfeit miracles—does not detract from the truth, value, and meaning of the genuine article.

With this in mind, we return to the issue of the possibility of miracles. Arguments denying the possibility of miracles may appear to be arguments about the rationality of the world or scientific method, but they are actually worldview arguments. In one form or another, those who deny the possibility of miracles are simply applying their presuppositions about the world to the question of miracles and concluding that the Christian view of miracles must be false. In other words, those who deny Christian miracles may appear to do so on some established scientific or historical basis used to judge the possibility or impossibility of the miraculous. But what we really find is that the deck has been stacked. The starting point of the argument is stated in such a way that miracles would be impossible in the world in which we live. The standards are designed to get the desired results. When the argument concludes that miracles are impossible, we should not be surprised. A simple form of this kind of argument can be stated in the following syllogism.

**Many worldviews by definition rule out the possibility of miracles.**

1. The laws of physics cannot be violated.
2. Miracles are a violation of the laws of physics.
3. Therefore, miracles cannot occur.

Obviously, if we define the laws of physics as inviolable and then define miracles as a violation of physical laws, it is a short and easy step to the conclusion, for the conclusion is already included in the definitions that form the premises. In itself, this sort of argument is not very interesting, but it does highlight the issue we have been emphasizing: Underlying the notion of miracle is worldview. Many worldviews by definition rule out the possibility of miracles, and people who hold to those worldviews will be inclined to deny any evidence, however forceful, that suggests that a miracle may have actually happened.

Buddhism, for example, denies the existence of God. In the Buddhist world, strange things—of the sort that might make an interesting television



show—often happen, but miracles as Christians define them are impossible for the simple reason that there is no God. Miracles in Judaism and Islam are fundamentally different from the meaning of a miracle in a religion like Buddhism and much closer in meaning to Christian miracles. In Judaism and Islam, a miracle is a work of the one true God. It testifies of His power, His goodness, and His special care for His creatures. In these respects, their theology of miracle is very similar to that of Christianity, but it differs in this one fundamental and important respect: miracles in the Bible have a special meaning grounded in a distinctly Christian understanding that their ultimate reference point is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

### Miracles and the Laws of Physics

Biblical miracles are not exceptions to the laws of physics; they are simply instances of God doing things out of the ordinary. From the perspective of the Christian worldview, the whole notion of physical laws must be denied. The world is not under the control of “forces” such as gravity, the weak and strong forces, and the electromagnetic force. The Christian worldview denies these as *independent* forces. Why? Listen to Steven Weinberg: “[O]ur discovery of the connected and convergent pattern of scientific explanations has done the very great service of teaching us that there is no room in nature for astrology or telekinesis or creationism or other superstitions.”<sup>2</sup> Like many today, Weinberg believes that science is discovering “explanations built into the logical structure of nature.”<sup>3</sup> He is offended, therefore, when a philosopher such as Wittgenstein suggests “at the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.”<sup>4</sup>

But Wittgenstein is right. The modern worldview presupposes that there are objective laws and forces ruling the world. These are believed to be built into the logical structure of nature. Since what we are actually talking about is man’s interpretation of the world, what the so-called “laws of nature” explain is not the way the world works, but what men believe about the way the world works. In other words, what is offensive to Weinberg is that

<sup>2</sup> *Dreams of a Final Theory*, 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Wittgenstein calls into question his religious presuppositions. Weinberg believes in a worldview for which he has no ultimate proof. His certainty that Christianity and creationism are superstitions that we no longer have to be burdened with is a certainty grounded in his presuppositions about nature. But we might ask, how do we know the universe has a logical structure? Or, how do we know the mind of man has any real connection to the facts of the outside world? Is not the only reality we know the reality that we perceive? If so, then is it not also true that all our “scientific facts” are only as good as our perception of reality? Even when we use instruments to extend our perception, we cannot design, construct, read, or interpret our instruments apart from the whole interpretive framework built into our senses. Given the presuppositions of a chance universe, evolving purely at random, aimed at no particular purpose or meaning, how do we know our minds and the scientific laws we create have any meaning at all? How do we know they are “true” or that the idea of “truth” itself has any meaning? For Weinberg’s worldview, these are not easy questions to answer. What shall the non-Christian do? Contrary to Weinberg’s delusions about the rationality of his worldview, when it comes to the most basic or ultimate questions, he answers by faith. He believes in a worldview that is essentially religious.

For the one who disparages faith, the fact that everything comes back to a faith-based starting point is a basic and inescapable problem, a “worldview-level” dilemma. If reason is god, man cannot afford to be stuck in a world where, like it or not, he must live by faith. Of course, the Christian also must stand on faith, but that is not an embarrassment for his worldview, for in the Christian worldview, man’s reason and experience are not the ultimate source of knowledge or wisdom. Man is God’s creature, designed to live by faith in God’s revelation and to reason in terms of that faith. This differs just as radically from worldviews that propose an irrational leap of faith as it does from the rationalist’s claim to knowledge independent from God.

The Christian view of God and the world also means there are no scientific laws with objective status giving us insight into the “logical structure” of the universe. An intelligent Christian does not and cannot believe that the fundamental forces of physics direct the whole world. God the Creator controls the world. Whatever secondary means He pleases to use, His ultimate manner of control is revealed in the creation story as covenantal. In addition, God has bound Himself, in the Noahic covenant, to uphold the



regular cycles of the world. In this sense, then, the universe does have what we might call a “logical structure,” and it is regular. But the structure of the world and the regularities of its movement are covenantal. They express the personal rule of God and His faithfulness, not impersonal forces and laws.

Covenantal control differs from the idea of impersonal forces and laws in important ways. First, covenantal regularities, much more than the scientist’s blind faith in impersonal laws, offer a foundation for scientific research. We have God’s promise that He will rule the world in a regular and principled manner so that man can rule the world under Him. This is the whole point of the “law-like” nature of the world. We are able to study His “schedule” and His ways, and then fit our ways to His. Thus, the denial of impersonal law and forces is not by any means the denial of science or scientific study. Rather, it is the recognition that the work of science fits into a distinct framework that gives science its singular significance.

Covenantal control is also personal. God is involved in the world. The Creator God of the Bible, who knows when a sparrow falls to the ground and numbers the hairs on our heads, is a God who is close to and intimately involved with His creation. He has not committed it to the control of impersonal forces, nor is He “breaking a law” of some sort when He does something out of the ordinary. Obviously, if miracles were not extraordinary,

**The structure of the world and the regularities of its movement are covenantal.**

that is, if they happened all the time everywhere, we would find predicting the conditions of the physical world extremely difficult, in which case, we would not be able to rule the world as God’s vice-regents and successfully fulfill the commission

He gave us. But the need for regularity in the world is not something that puts God in a bind. He does what He wills when He wills. Since covenantal control is personal, requiring God’s involvement with the world, miracles are expected, if unusual, occurrences from the Christian perspective. A covenantal God naturally shows Himself and gives signs of His covenantal rule to guide our hearts to Him and remind us of who He is.

## Kinds of Miracles

Miracles must be distinguished from God’s providential rule and His answers to prayer. In one sense, we can properly say that God has done a



miracle whenever we see what seems to be a remarkable answer to prayer. But the Bible does not usually record this sort of event as a miracle. Though the Bible does record God answering the prayers of His people, it also records cases where their prayers seem to go unanswered. Also, God's answer to the prayers of an individual may appear spectacular to that individual but entirely ordinary to others around him. When, for example, God saved David from Saul, we know there was a special working of God's providence that led the Philistines to attack the land at just the right time (1 Sam. 23:27–28). People indisposed to believe in God easily explain away such events as happenstance. But the fact that relatively similar providential events abound in history is undeniable, for God acts daily to carry out His will. God also answers prayer, and so Christians are not wrong to see His hand at work in the everyday affairs of life.

**The miracles in the Bible are covenant signs.**

What the Bible records as miracles are something essentially different. They are special signs and manifestations of God's power but, more than that, signs of His covenant. The covenantal meaning of miracles is the reason they do not occur with regular frequency throughout the history of the world. In the Bible, we see that God works miracles at special times: When God brought covenantal judgment on the world in the days of Noah, when He gave a New Covenant to Abraham, when He led Israel out of Egypt, and when God was about to bring judgment on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These were all times of covenantal transition. When God brings one covenantal era to an end in order to inaugurate a new one, He "comes near" and, as the children of Israel observed in the wilderness, His presence is glorious.

Biblical miracles were all associated with God's covenantal presence in special blessing and judgment. It is this covenantal connection that makes the miracles of Jesus so significant, for they publicly vindicated Him as the Messiah, the one through whom God was bringing a new covenant. In like manner, the apostles through their miracles authenticated Christ as Messiah and themselves as His special representatives. The miracles in the Bible, then, are not merely powerful and amazing works that fill us with wonder, nor are they simply exceptional ways of meeting our needs. They are covenant signs. The covenant is the key to distinguishing biblical miracles from what we often call miraculous events. Of course, we may use the word

*miracle* to refer to various kinds of events, but when we do it is important to remember that the miracles in the Bible are qualitatively different because they are covenant signs.

## Miracles and the Covenant

The relationship between miracles and the covenant merits further consideration. The connection between miracles and the covenant is apparent in the Old Testament when we explore the notion of a covenantal sign. The first such sign that God gave to man was the rainbow, the sign of the covenant that He granted to Noah and to the whole race through him (Gen. 9:12–13, 17). Circumcision, too, was given as a covenant sign (Gen. 17:11). Also, the miracles that Moses did in Egypt were covenant signs (Exod. 4:8–28; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1–2) associated with non-miraculous covenant signs like the Passover feast and the Sabbath (Exod. 13:14–16; 31:12–17; Deut. 5:15). In the same way, miraculous events in the history of Israel are invariably associated with God's covenantal blessings and curses. Extraordinary blessings and curses usually attend times of extraordinary apostasy. They are also associated with the gift of a new covenant. For example, Elijah and Elisha ministered to Israel in a time of covenantal judgment, and the signs they performed testified for the believing remnant and against the apostate majority. The miracles of Jesus and His apostles, too, were signs of the covenant. The Israel of Jesus' day, like Israel in the days of Ahab, had departed from the faith and her leaders were corrupt. The people needed healing in every way, not just for their physical diseases. Jesus worked His miracles solely for Israel's benefit because He was the Messiah who had come to restore Israel to her priestly role. Diseases like leprosy and blindness disqualified the people from priestly service and temple worship. By healing their diseases, Jesus was offering His Messianic credentials and calling the Jews into a new covenant.

Miracles, then, are not merely works of power or answers to prayer. They are specific signs of the covenant, similar to other covenantal signs and part of the covenantal system of blessings and curses. God promised His people that if they kept the covenant, He would bless them, and if they broke the covenant, He would curse them (Lev. 26; Deut. 28). The blessings and curses of the covenant include what modern non-Christians regard as matters under the rule of natural forces—rain (Lev. 26:4; Deut. 28:12, 23–24),



fertility (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 28:4, 11, 38–41), wild animals (Lev. 26:22), and disease (Lev. 26:16; Deut. 28:21–22, 27, 35)—or historical forces—economics (Lev. 26:26; Deut. 28:8, 12–13, 30–32) and politics (Lev. 26:7–8, 17, 25, 31–33; Deut. 28:7, 25, 32–33, 36–37). In all of these matters, God's control and leading are the real "secret" to the working of the world. In the normal process of history, individual men, groups, and nations are blessed, disciplined, or cursed by God. Though God's involvement is both direct and indirect, it is usually not obvious.

Miracles, too, may use means, as when God brought a wind to part the Red Sea and Jesus used the five loaves of bread to feed five thousand men (not including women and children), or be accomplished without means, as when Jesus commanded dead Lazarus to come out of his tomb. What the Bible frequently calls "signs" and what we call "miracles" should be regarded as extensions of the normal blessings and curses of the covenant. When God brings an end to one covenant or ushers in a new one, He often manifests His presence in blessings and curses in an exceptional manner. Miracles differ from ordinary providence only in being special manifestations that publicly testify of God's power and presence.

From the perspective of the Christian worldview, we should think it odd if, at extraordinary times, God did not manifest His covenant blessing and curse in extraordinary ways. When the covenantal situation in the world calls for a response by God, He shows His people He is not far off. He brings judgment and blessing and saves His people. Throughout the era of the Old Covenant, from the time of Adam to Christ, God repeatedly manifested His presence at special times and saved His people in special ways.

But there is something more basic than this. Miracles are associated with the blessing and curse of the covenant, but not during "ordinary times." Miracles occur during times of covenantal transition. When God makes a new covenant, He Himself comes near. Miracles manifest His presence and authenticate His messengers. How would the children of Israel have recognized Moses as a prophet from God if not for the miracles that demonstrated to them that God was with him and working through him to judge Egypt and bring a new covenant to Israel. The covenant Lord Himself must be present, in person or through His representatives, in order to grant a new covenant. Miracles are the powerful manifestation of the presence of the Lord of Creation in times of covenantal transition.

## Miracles and the Incarnation

There is no greater miracle than the incarnation. The fact that God makes His presence known in saving His people takes on a wholly new and deeper meaning in the incarnation of Christ. None of the covenants in the Old Covenant era from the time of Adam to the time of Christ was “new” in the full sense of the word. They were extensions of the original covenant with Adam that renewed the promise of the “seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15). Only in the incarnation of Christ do we see the full meaning of God’s intention of granting His covenant to a new race of man.

In Christ, the new humanity is one with God. Jesus is *Immanuel*, “God with us” (Mt. 1:23). His identity as the covenant Lord, however, was partially disguised. Rather than presenting Himself to the world in pomp and glory and overwhelming the Roman Empire with signs of His great power, He came in the form of a lowly, humble man, a carpenter from Nazareth. He repeatedly warned His disciples not to tell people who He was (Mt. 8:4; 16:20; 17:9; Mk. 7:36; 8:30; 9:9; Lk. 5:14; 8:56; 9:21), for they did not understand the true meaning of His signs. Nowhere is this clearer than in John chapter 6, when Jesus fed the multitudes with a few loaves of bread. They immediately saw the significance of a miraculous provision of bread in the wilderness and understood Jesus was a new Moses, the promised Messiah (6:14). But to them the salvation the Messiah would bring was political deliverance from Rome (6:15). When Jesus explained the meaning of the New Covenant, they all forsook him (6:66).

The Pharisees did not deny Jesus’ miracles; they simply claimed that He did them by the power of the devil (Mt. 12:24). God, however, was manifesting His power and presence in a new and entirely different way. He came into the world as a man. He did not terrify the Jews with the glory of His presence, as He had done at Mount Sinai. He was now one of us, our elder brother. For those who had eyes to see, God indeed “tabernacled” (Jn. 1:14) among us, just as He had done in the wilderness, but He manifested His glory in a new and wonderful manner. All the miracles in the Old Covenant era were in fact pointing forward to the time when God would come to us and become one with us through the incarnation. Every renewal of the Old Covenant was a promise of the New Covenant to come in Christ.

When the New Covenant was given, therefore, it came with signs and wonders, confirming that God was indeed bringing in the definitive new era,



unlike anything that had ever happened before. That was the meaning behind the miracles of Jesus and His disciples. It was also the meaning of the miracle of Jesus' virgin birth—the God of the covenant had come to save His covenant people. God sent His own Son to be born of a virgin to become flesh and blood like us. The Son of God did not come for a visit; He became the second covenant head, the leader of a new race of man. In His birth, the Second Person took upon Himself a full human nature. Like Adam at the time of his creation, Jesus was a man without sin.

Unlike Adam, Jesus lived a life of faithfulness to God. In the miracle of the resurrection, Jesus did not simply come back to life. He defeated sin and death and became the heir to a new life. Since He died as a covenant representative to replace Adam, the old creation, the Old Covenant, and the old world system all died in His death. With His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God, all was made new. His miracles announced and prepared the way for a New Covenant, a New Jerusalem, a new Israel, and a new temple.

**Jesus' miracles are essential to the Christian worldview.**

The miracles of Jesus, then, are an essential aspect of the Christian worldview. They demonstrate that the God of the covenant rules history according to His perfect covenantal plan. Jesus' miracles call men to covenantal faith and obedience. They announce that God has become one with man in the incarnation. This most profound of truths is central to a proper Christian understanding of the world.

## Incarnation and Worldview

Before discussing the worldview implications of the incarnation, we need to understand exactly what the doctrine of the incarnation is. The Christian consensus cannot be taken for granted, for the word *incarnation* is used in various ways, and in the academic discipline of comparative religion, the notion of incarnation is vague. Since the English word *incarnation* comes from the Latin *incarnatio*, which means “being in flesh,” any sort of “being in flesh” can be called an incarnation. In Hinduism, for example, Vishnu appears at various times as a great boar, a giant fish, a man-lion, and a dwarf, to name only a few of his various manifestations. His most popular appearances are as Krishna and Rama, both warrior heroes who came to defeat demons that oppressed the earth. All of Vishnu's various forms have been

referred to as “incarnations.” For some Buddhists, Siddhartha Guatama—known as the Buddha because of his attaining enlightenment—was the incarnation of the Eternal Buddha. In ancient Egypt and ancient Japan, the king—Pharaoh in Egypt, Emperor in Japan—was considered an incarnation of deity, in a manner of speaking. These and similar “incarnations” are often considered to be parallel to the Christian idea of the incarnation of God in Christ.

John Hick, a well-known philosopher of religion, is one of those who regard the notion of incarnation as the common possession of many ancient cultures. According to Hick, the idea of a special human who is regarded as a “son of God” is metaphorical. The problem with Christianity is that somewhere along the line someone understood the poetry as prose and constructed a metaphysical doctrine in the place of the metaphorical idea. Thus, Hick considers the orthodox Christian theology of incarnation to be a sort of religious heresy that “has long poisoned relationships both between Christians and Jews and between Christians and Muslims, as well as affecting the history of Christian imperialism in the Far East, India, Africa, and elsewhere.”<sup>5</sup>

We need to understand very clearly that if incarnation means no more than John Hick thinks it does, then Christianity is not only not superior to other religions, it is a false religion and a fraud. It was not, as Hick asserts, the Church of later centuries that took the poetry of the Bible and made it into prose. Thomas was a disciple of Jesus and a strictly monotheistic Jew, yet he bowed down before Jesus and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28). Paul, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, was not the type to use an expression like “Lord of glory” to refer to a mere creature (I Cor. 2:8). The Church did not transform a metaphor into a theological doctrine. She simply followed the monotheistic Jewish apostles of Jesus, who claimed to have met a man who was God in the flesh—something they would never have thought of before encountering Jesus, because Jews were not like the rest of the people in the ancient world for whom the line between the gods and man was rather vague. The Jews believed in a transcendent God, separate and distinct from the world, who had created all things from nothing. What is so startling about the biblical notion of incarnation is that John tells us

<sup>5</sup> John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 8.



that the Eternal Word, who created all things without exception, did Himself become flesh and dwell among us (Jn. 1:1–3, 14). If this is not true, then the whole Christian religion is false and the Christian worldview is a chimera. Christianity cannot be separated from the incarnation and merged with other religions by reinterpreting the biblical language of the incarnation as metaphor. Either Christ is the metaphysical Son of God, distinct in Person and equal with the Father in being and attributes, or Christianity is a sham.

## Incarnation Defined

The Bible describes Jesus to us in clear but conceptually difficult language. On the one hand, it is patent that Jesus is a real man, born from Mary. He lived a normal life as a child and worked as a carpenter until He was thirty. Like any other man, He ate and slept. He got tired. He wept over the suffering of His friends. After about three years of ministry, He was crucified. He died and was buried. Three days later, He rose again from the dead in the same body in which He was crucified. He appeared to His disciples for forty days, teaching them and training them for their ministry (Acts 1:3). Then, He ascended bodily into heaven, where He was given the place of honor at the right hand of God. He will return bodily at the end of history. And He will dwell bodily with the Church for eternity as her Lord.

The assumption of humanity by the second Person of the Trinity was not temporary or partial. The Son of God is a real man and He is a real man forever. But that does not mean that He has ceased to be God. The Bible emphasizes the truth of Jesus' real divinity no less than that of His true humanity. The Gospels show us a divine Person, the Son of God, who became a man. He was the timeless Word from eternity past (Jn. 1:1), though He was born in time to the Virgin Mary.

All of this is the testimony of Scripture. The problem for the early Church was how to put the whole testimony of Scripture into a single statement, how to summarize it from Scripture. Some who claimed to be Christians considered the idea of the incarnation offensive. How could the infinite God assume a finite body? Why would He do so? The material world was considered corrupt and evil. Jesus, they said, merely appeared to have a physical body, but since He was God, He could never actually have been a

man. The Apostle John addressed a heresy of this sort when he said that whoever denies that Jesus has come in the flesh is an antichrist (1 Jn. 4:2–3; 2 Jn. 7).

Other heresies arose as well. Some denied the deity of Christ, others denied His humanity. Some virtually regarded Him as two persons, one human and one divine. Others mixed His divine and human natures. Eventually, the Church was forced to come up with a summary statement of the biblical teaching about Christ, in the same way that it had come up with a summary statement about God. The Creed of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) was the Church's definitive statement of the doctrine of Christ.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures; inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Here the Church offered a clear confession of the faith set forth in the New Testament. This confession confronts us with what is paradoxical and beyond our comprehension. Just as we cannot fathom the doctrine of the Trinity, we cannot actually grasp what it means that one Person has two natures, a human and a divine nature, without mixture or confusion. But we can confess what we know to be true. The testimony of Scripture is clear and our own conscience responds to the word of truth with the "Amen" of faith.



## Incarnation Applied

The implications of the doctrine of the incarnation are profound. If Jesus is God incarnate, the Creator of the world manifest in human flesh, He is the One who defines truth in every realm. In Paul's words, "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ (Col. 2:4). Only through the incarnation did man come to know the truth of the Trinity. Thus, to expound the Christian worldview as a trinitarian worldview includes unfolding the implications of the incarnation.

### *Jesus and Religion*

Religion is just one of many areas where Christianity is considered offensive. If Jesus is the Son of God incarnate, then He is the only way for men to be saved. Jesus Himself asserted, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me." (Jn. 14:6). According to Jesus, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and all the other religions of the world that do not confess Him as the Eternal Son of God are false religions that lead men astray. These religions cannot save. Their doctrines are not true. It is important here to understand that if Jesus were simply a teacher of truth, there might be other teachers also, and there may be many different perspectives on the "truth." But Jesus claimed to be far more than a mere teacher of the truth. He presented Himself as the truth that must be taught. The name of God includes "truth" and the Spirit is truth (Exod. 34:5–7; 1 Jn. 5:6–7). For Christianity, truth is the trinitarian God Himself.

The incarnation means that to know the truth is not simply having right ideas or a formula that summarizes the relationship between energy and matter. If man is to know the truth, he must have a real relationship—a covenantal relationship—with the One who is truth. Ideas and formulas are not necessarily wrong or irrelevant, but they are only one aspect of our relationship with the trinitarian God. To know the One who is truth is to have eternal life (Jn. 17:3). The most profound religious truths, the Trinity and the incarnation, imply that religious truth can never be reduced to mere philosophical ideas. God does not save us simply by teaching us right attitudes and action. He became one of us and lived and walked among us, revealing the ultimate truth in His own person and the reality of God's love through His death for our sins on the cross.

*Cosmic Justice*

The death of the Son of God had a cosmic significance. The Bible tells us Jesus died for the sins of the world. He did not die because of His own sins or because death is a natural event that eventually overtakes us all. According to the Bible, death is not natural. It is a punishment inflicted on the human race because of the sin of Adam. Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for the sins of men, so that our sins could be forgiven if we believe in Him. Salvation is grounded in God's perfect justice no less than in God's great love. God's absolute righteousness is such that He will not forgive unless the just penalty has been paid. His love is so great that He took the penalty upon Himself, sending His Son to die in our stead.

No other religion offers an explanation for the world's problems while also providing a fully satisfying judgment against the evil in the world. For most forms of Buddhism and Hinduism, the essence of man's problems is found in the way the world is. We suffer simply because it is in the nature of the world to cause suffering. Suffering and evil are cosmic realities. To be saved is to be saved from existence in this world. For other religions, such as Islam, salvation and forgiveness are gifts of Allah, but there is no basis in justice for Allah to forgive (though it must be added that the concept of sin in Islam is so shallow that Allah does not have as much to forgive). Judaism is an unfinished religion. The Old Testament sacrificial system testified that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness, but the continual offering also showed that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. With the destruction of the temple, its sacrifices ceased almost two thousand years ago. Judaism became a quasi-religion, losing the very center of its worship system. The book of Leviticus demands atonement, but modern Judaism has no method for atonement, and the strict demands of justice require a sacrifice greater than that of bulls and goats (Heb. 10:4). Only the death of the Messiah as a substitute for His people can fulfill the real meaning of the Levitical system.

**Jesus presented Himself not as a mere teacher of truth but as the Truth that must be taught.**

*Ethics*

The life of Christ sets the example of true humanity and true righteousness. John said, "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk



just as He walked" (I Jn. 2:6). It is clear in the context what John means (I Jn. 2:3–8; cf. Jn. 15:1–16). He is not saying all Christians are to work miracles or to become special servants of God. John points to the life of Jesus as a model for keeping God's commandments (Jn. 15:10). But John is not talking about superficial or merely outward obedience. The greatest command was the command to love God with our whole self and to love our brother as Jesus loves him (I Jn. 2:9–10; 3:16).

Once again, no other religion has a leader to compare with Jesus. Read the Koran and the Muslim accounts of the life of Mohammed, or Buddhist accounts of the life of the Buddha. These and other great religious leaders of the past were men whose charismatic charm, brilliance, devotion to the cause, and superior gifts attracted a following. But they simply do not compare to Jesus. Mohammed's polygamy, including marrying a girl of about ten years of age, was more or less acceptable in his day—though after he revealed the law that a man should only

marry four women at the most, he conveniently received special instruction from God to marry the rest of his many

**The life of Christ sets the example of true humanity and true righteousness.**

wives. Also, his warrior ethics and his ancient Arabian family structure cannot stand the test of time. Islam is burdened with a polygamous warrior-prophet as the example of godly living. The life of Buddha, on the other hand, was much more a life of self-denial, at least as far as the tradition teaches it. But we really know very little about the man himself, and his teaching calls for neither love of God nor neighbor. It is a radical denial of self and the world to obtain salvation from the cycle of rebirth, the fundamental metaphysical reality of suffering.

Of course, a true ethic of love requires a view of reality in which love has ultimate meaning. Only trinitarian Christianity provides that view of reality and only the incarnation of Christ offers a concrete image of love. Only the Father's gift of love to us, the ultimate self-sacrifice of the Son on the cross, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, show us the true meaning of love.

### *Politics*

Jesus came preaching that "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15). But about three years later, instead of being crowned in Jerusalem or leading a Jewish army to conquer Rome, He was nailed to a

cross as a criminal. If this had been the end of the whole story, we would probably not have even heard His name. His whole ministry and the announcement of the kingdom of God would have been regarded as a colossal blunder or perverse fraud. Anyone who proclaims Himself as the one to usher in the kingdom of God and save the world but ends up dead instead is not a man worthy of great honor. False messiahs abound in Jewish history, and none of them is treated as a great man.

But death was not the end of Jesus. He rose again from the grave. The resurrection vindicated Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. The crucifixion appeared to be nothing more than the Roman Empire putting another Jewish insurrectionist to death. In reality, it was God working through the Romans to bring about the judgment of sin and Satan, laying the foundations for His kingdom. Jesus by His death defeated death and sin. He rose from the dead because He had won the victory.

When He rose from the dead, He did not simply return to everyday life in Palestine, as Lazarus did, nor did He have the same mortal body, as Lazarus did. Lazarus came back to life and returned home to live as he had lived before, after which he died again and was buried again. Jesus rose from the dead never to die again. His resurrection body was a new body, the body of the new world and the New Covenant. In His new creation body, Jesus spent forty days teaching His disciples. He then ascended into heaven and was seated at the right hand of God. The death of Jesus was not the end of His life nor the end of His ministry; it was the foundation for His kingdom. By defeating Satan, sin, and death through His death, Jesus won His right to the throne. The victory of the cross is seen in the resurrection and ascension.

The gospel that Christians proclaim, then, is in the same message Jesus preached. He announced, "The kingdom of God is at hand!" His disciples proclaim, "The kingdom has come!" and "Jesus is Lord." In Jesus' words, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth!" The gospel is an announcement of Jesus' victory and the coming of God's kingdom in heaven and on earth. The announcement of the kingdom obviously has political implications. If Christ is the King with all authority in heaven and on earth, then the kings of the world owe allegiance to Him as the King of kings. If Christ is King and Lord, then His Law-Word is the ultimate standard for all civil law. The practical implications of this for government are broad and deserve a multi-volume treatment.



But even more than the relatively direct applications of biblical teaching in this area, the indirect implications of biblical ethics profoundly affect society and eventually come to expression in politics and law. To take just one example, monogamy is one of the most important basic truths of biblical ethics, so much so that it is included in the Ten Commandments. When the percentage of Christians in a society is sufficiently high, monogamy naturally becomes the social standard and the law.

In a truly monogamous society, all that undermines monogamy—adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, and pornography, for example—would be forbidden by law. On the positive side, laws that protect

**The announcement of the kingdom obviously has political implications.**

family property, inheritance, and civil rights would naturally follow. When a man is married to one woman, he devotes his life to work for her and their children. Together they seek to pass an inheritance on to their children and the sum of social wealth increases from generation to generation. Monogamy and property laws in the context of Christian faith and ethics were the foundation for the wealth and freedom of the West.

### *Covenant*

The establishment of the kingdom of God means something far more than saving a few individual souls or introducing a new religion into the world. God sent Jesus to save the world (Jn. 3:16–18), but saving men from sin is not just canceling a debt—it includes the restoration of the original meaning and order of creation. Even more than that, it is the transformation of the original creation into the new creation. God created man in covenantal union with Himself. Man's commission was to grow and mature in realization of the covenant fellowship of love. Man's transgression ruined the original covenant, but God in His grace provided a way of salvation. Not only was man forgiven, but he was also raised to covenantal union with God.

Christ is the God-man, the One in whom God and man are perfectly united. From the time of the incarnation, Christ is man forever. His incarnation was not a temporary assumption of human nature for the purpose of revealing God in this world or dying on the cross. Jesus assumed our nature in order to be the head of a new human race, a race "in Christ" rather than "in Adam." The new human race fulfills the commission that God gave Adam, bringing the world to its fullness and completing man's historical

task. The new mankind, the bride of Christ, is brought into the covenant fellowship of the Trinity. Union with God is not ontological promotion but covenantal fellowship. Man is accepted as a partner in the covenant love and communion of God.

## Conclusion

To deny biblical miracles is to deny that God is near and that He works in history and manifests His presence in the gift of the covenant. For every miracle is a witness to the new creation. Their denial is an aspect of man's attempt to escape from his Creator and Judge. No secular or non-Christian worldview can tolerate the miracles of Jesus because of their worldview significance; they must be denied at all costs. It is harder to deny Jesus Himself. The modern answer has been the attempt to separate the person of Jesus from His miracles and from those aspects of His teaching men find unpalatable, while preserving those things He said which, in the modern context, confirm modern prejudices. This defanged, liberal Jesus is no threat to modern sensibilities. But the Jesus of the Bible who performed miracles and claimed to be God is dangerous. He claims even now to be Lord of lords and King of kings and He demands that we submit to Him in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The incarnation of Christ is the greatest miracle of history and the central truth of God's saving work. The incarnation was necessary in order to save man, for without a sinless substitute to bear the penalty for our sins, sin could never really be forgiven. At the same time, our substitute must be able to offer a sacrifice of infinite value, a sacrifice adequate to redeem a whole race and cleanse the world of sin. Only the sacrifice of God Himself could satisfy the demands of God's justice. Only the incarnation of God Himself could open the way for salvation. But Christ came for a greater purpose than death on a cross. Jesus became man in order to reveal God to us and bring a new race of men into covenant union with God. The Son of God became man so that a new race of men might become sons of God. He became man to build His church and inaugurate a new kingdom.



## Review Questions

1. What is the challenge of the miracles of Jesus?
2. How important are miracles for Christian faith?
3. Explain the relationship between miracles and worldview.
4. What is the typical anti-Christian approach to miracles in the modern West?
5. Explain why miracles are not violations of the laws of physics.
6. What are some of the different kinds of miracles?
7. Explain how miracles relate to the covenant.
8. Why are Jesus' miracles especially important?
9. What are some of the differences between the Christian use of the word *incarnation* and non-Christian uses of the word?
10. Offer a biblical definition of the incarnation.
11. How does the incarnation affect our view of religion?
12. Choose a topic among the following and explain its relationship to the incarnation, comparing Christian and non-Christian views: cosmic justice, ethics, politics, covenant.





## 8. Trinity and Kingdom

THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL is the proclamation of Christocracy—Christ’s reign. The kingdom focus and purpose of Christianity, however, have been lost in the modern West. Why? Partly because Christians themselves have turned from their high calling and compromised with the world. Also, an aggressive secular humanistic competitor has attacked Christian foundations and stolen Christian social distinctives, modifying them to fit the secular program. Now, we are taught that the so-called “Wars of Religion” in the period following the Reformation demonstrated once and for all that religion and politics do not mix. Our political salvation is to be found in the separation of religion from politics. For the humanistic political theory of the Enlightenment, the public square is open to all but Christ and His apostles. Free and open debate is the ideal, but quoting Scripture is not allowed. Tolerance, after all, can extend only so far.

As long as the West was primarily Christian, the moral foundations of the West were secure. Minor players like Judaism, secular humanism, and various and sundry cults shared the moral and religious stage, but Christian ethics dominated. Judaism and Christianity shared the Ten Commandments. Most secular humanists had enough of a Christian hangover to go along with the Ten Commandments, for their mothers and grandmothers were Christians. The cults, sects, and other marginal groups occasionally rejected one or more of the commandments—like the Mormon rejection of monogamy—but their social impact was negligible.

The postmodern world presents us with a new reality. Buddhism, Islam, and other religions and philosophies, even witchcraft and the so-called New Age sects, now compete on the open market of truth, each proclaiming not merely different understandings of worship and the Lord's Supper or the proper subjects of baptism, but wholly different worldviews. As a result, the secular humanist vision for society confronts a challenge arising from the consequences of its own doctrine of tolerance. Tolerance of any and every religious opinion undermines the very foundations of the West, foundations solidly laid by the Law of Moses. Ironically, as the case of Islam clearly shows, it also undermines the basis for toleration itself. The doctrine of religious equality, which in principle demands the recognition of even the most bizarre and perverse faiths, would reduce to very real absurdity if consistently practiced. In fact, philosophical and religious confusion combined with social pragmatism plays a greater role in the public sphere today than principle.

### The Kingdom Idea

A central feature of every worldview is some type of "kingdom" notion, since every worldview must integrate its view of society and humanity with the larger picture of reality. Even in the secular humanist West of our day, where the kingdom notion may seem to have been toppled with the kings themselves, there is still a comparable idea. What can the "kingdom" be when men believe in a universe that came about by chance, where the human race is a local accident in a larger impersonal (and accidental) cosmos? One option is to view our planet as "spaceship earth," a mere ball of dirt drifting along in the infinite expanse with no particular goal and no special meaning beyond what we give it. History, in this scheme, ends when the sun dies. In this naturalistic view, mankind is one because the whole race is biologically one. Diverse societies rooted in diverse histories, languages, tribal customs, and religions compose the brute reality created by the accident of our history. Given the lack of meaning and purpose, this is a rather dark and barren, but nonetheless common, perspective.

**Every worldview must integrate its view of society and humanity with the larger picture of reality.**

The Islamic view differs greatly from the secular humanist perspective.



Borrowing from Judaism and Christianity, Islam declares itself to be the one true religion, the fulfillment of the best in all other religions and, more particularly, the fulfillment of Judaism and Christianity. Its theology of history is underdeveloped and lacks systematic integration in part because Mohammed did not borrow carefully enough. The outlines, however, come from various parts of the Bible. Imitating the New Testament doctrine that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecies, Islam claims Mohammed fulfills prophecies from both Old and New Testaments. The Bible teaches that Jesus brought in a new age, the final age of history. Islam claims it was Mohammed, not Jesus, who brought in the new age. Just as Christians reconstructed the calendar to reflect the centrality of Christ for their view of the world, Muslims have their own calendar that sees Mohammed's flight (in the Arabic, *Hegira*) from Mecca to Medina as the beginning of the new world (A.D. 622).<sup>1</sup>

Muslims have a problem in that they wish to accept the Bible and Jesus as at least partially true. But Jesus claimed to be God. His deity would disprove Mohammed's claim to be the one who fulfills all. To deny the finality and centrality of Jesus, one must deny His deity. Islam, therefore, teaches that Christianity as the confession of trinitarian faith is a distortion of the truth, largely invented by the Apostle Paul. Paul is the true originator of "Christianity." The real Jesus did not die on the cross and rise again. He did not claim to be anything more than a prophet or to offer anything more than a new teaching. In spite of demoting him to the status of a mere prophet, Muslims nevertheless believe their Jesus will come again at the end of history to usher in the great resurrection, the final judgment, and an everlasting paradise specifically designed for the tastes of seventh-century Arabic men: "maids of modest glance whom no man nor jinn has deflowered before" (Koran 55:56); "gardens of pleasure . . . gold-weft couches, reclining on them face to face. Around them shall go eternal youths, with goblets and ewers and a cup of flowing wine; no headache shall they feel therefrom, nor shall their wits be dimmed! And fruits such as they deem the best; and flesh of fowl as they desire; and bright and large-eyed maids like hidden pearls; a reward for that which ye have done!" (56:10, 15–24); and "gardens, and vineyards, and girls with swelling breasts" (78:32).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is no unanimity among them, however, on the precise calculations.

<sup>2</sup> The Koran, trans. E. H. Palmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953 [1900]), 465, 466, 513–514.

In the Islamic view, the world is divided into two: the house of Islam and the house of unbelief. It is the responsibility of Muslims to bring the whole world into the house of Islam—which is to say that Islam has its own version of the “Great Commission,” a command to change the world. However, the Muslim commission is poles apart from the Christian vision. Through misunderstanding the significance of war in the Bible, Mohammed created the Muslim view of Holy War—*Jihad*. Apparently he thought the wars between godly Jews and the Gentile pagans were biblical examples of spreading the truth by military conquest. Let the pagans convert or die! Thus, in conservative Islam, the commission to change the world includes calls to actual war.

But when the sacred months are passed away, kill the idolaters wherever ye may find them; and take them, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of observation; but if they repent, and are steadfast in prayer, and give alms, then let them go their way; verily, God is forgiving and merciful.<sup>3</sup> (9:5)

Classical Buddhism has another view of the world. According to Buddhism, the world is divided into various ages, but Buddhist theological traditions diverge on this matter as on almost every other. In the older sects of Buddhism, human society is divided between those who are members of the priesthood and devote their lives to the truth, and the rest of humanity who lead secondary lives more or less defiled by desire. In either case, there is little to worry about in any ultimate sense. Those in this world without enlightenment will be stuck in the cycle of death and rebirth until they finally attain enlightenment. Eventually the whole world will be enlightened and history will progress to a new age. In some versions of Buddhism, the end of history brings us back to the beginning, so that we can repeat the whole, long process. History itself is an eternal cycle. After all, once you get to the end, what else is there to do?

<sup>3</sup> The Koran, trans. E. H. Palmer, 156. This is only one of many places in the Koran that could be cited. The verse from chapter 9 quoted above is from one of the later recited chapters of the Koran. When Mohammed first began to recite, he was in Mecca and a member of a small persecuted group. After moving to Medina and gaining control, the exhortations to patience were gradually replaced with commands to self-defense and then violent aggression.



In the Buddhist view, one might say the goal of history is the enlightenment of the whole world. (If at that point history comes to an end and we are not forced to repeat the whole story forever, then there is some sort of goal and end.) Exactly what this means, however, is not clear. To attain enlightenment in a pantheistic world is to cease being an individual. All individual persons are absorbed into the impersonal, all-inclusive One. Reincarnation also eliminates the meaning of the individual person. Which of the many reincarnations a man lives through is really “he”? For Buddhists, the answer seems to be “None.” There can be no real “you.”

In our day, the kingdom ideas of secular humanism, Islam, and Buddhism provide the major alternatives to the Christian worldview. Cults and new age religions offer variations on and combinations of the Bible, secularism, and pantheism. Because of distortions of the media, public education, pop culture, and the arts, Christians in the modern West are often confused about the larger kingdom picture of their own worldview. There is, therefore, a very real need to recover the biblical view of the kingdom in order to recover a Christian view of man and his life in this world.

## The Biblical Kingdom

As we have already seen, God created the world as His kingdom. Adam and Eve were to rule over the kingdom as His covenantal representatives (Gen. 1:26). They were His vicegerents over the rest of creation. Their descendents, too, were to rule over the kingdom, but Adam’s sin disrupted the kingdom program. De facto rule fell into the hands of Satan, to whom Adam had submitted in the Fall, and mankind in Adam was unable to build the kingdom of God. Therefore, God sent the new Adam, Jesus Christ, to be the covenant head of a new race that would build a new world. We see, then, that the biblical story of fall and redemption is the story of the kingdom of God. In its original form, the kingdom was lost through sin. Christ came to build a new kingdom, one that will spread into all the world and endure forever.

## The Principle of the Kingdom

The principle of the original kingdom was the flesh. If Adam had not sinned, the word *flesh* would not have taken on the pejorative connotations it

now has. It would simply have pointed to the facts that Adam was a man of flesh, that Eve was created from His flesh, and that the rest of humanity and human institutions grew out of the relationships of the flesh. Because of Adam's sin, however, the word *flesh* carries with it other implications. We think of sin, corruption, and death. The first creation, the first covenant, and everything associated with them are tainted with the sin of Adam and the corruption and death that came from his sin.

Christ came in the flesh. He was a true son of Adam and under the covenant in Adam, though without sin (Gal. 4:4). To redeem us from our sins, He took upon Himself the sins of the world. The curse of the Old Covenant had to be satisfied before a New Covenant and a new world could

**The biblical story of fall and redemption is the story of the kingdom of God.**

come. Jesus' death brought the old world to an end. His resurrection introduced the new world, a brand new creation, under the new principle of the Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, therefore, was not a mere "religious" event. It was a definitive and objective change in the history of the world. By pouring out the Spirit on the Church, Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant for the new creation. As in the world of the Old Covenant, everything ultimately developed from the "flesh" of Adam, so in the world of the New Covenant, everything springs from the Spirit of God.

## The Institutions of the Kingdom

All this discussion of the flesh and the Spirit may sound too abstract. To understand very clearly what this all means, we need to consider the institutions of the kingdom. What are they? They are the three social institutions established by a covenant oath. The family, as an institution, is based upon the covenant oath of marriage. The civil authority and its various branches are grounded in oaths of loyalty and truth. The church, as an institution, is built upon the oaths of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ordination oaths of its leaders. Every society will have other institutions as well, and they are all important, but they do not normally require an oath, for good reason. There is no biblical ground, for example, for demanding all carpenters to take an oath and join a guild that requires them to protect one another from non-guild competition. On the other hand, Christians cannot



escape the institution of the local church or the oaths of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

### *The Old Covenant*

As we have already noted, the principle of the flesh dominated the kingdom under the first creation. Adam was a man of flesh and Eve was created out of his flesh. In the Garden of Eden, the only covenantal institution was the family, the institution of the flesh. When husband and wife marry, they become one flesh. The kingdom grew by God blessing the flesh. Adam and Eve had children who also married and had other children. The original institutions of civil authority and religion were grounded in the family and were an outgrowth of the principle of the flesh. If there had been no sin, this would have all tended toward good. Because of Adam's sin, the family became a source of curse as much as a source of blessing, for the flesh as a principle was corrupted in Adam.

The family, therefore, throughout the history of the world during the Old Covenant failed to be faithful to the kingdom. The story of the first brothers, Cain and Abel, is a case in point. Also, Israel, the chosen nation, was the seed of Abraham. He was their father in the flesh, and the inheritance, though not limited to the fleshly seed, was primarily thought of in terms of physical descendants.<sup>4</sup> Time and again, Abraham's seed failed to truly serve God. In the realm of government, we see the same pattern of repeated failure. David had the promise of blessing for himself and his royal seed, but the story of his seed was the same as the history of the seed of Abraham and the seed of Adam. The realm of religious authority fared no better. The tribe of Levi was chosen because of their zeal and faithfulness for God (Exod. 32:25–29). The family of Aaron among them was given special blessing. According to the principle of the covenant, office and responsibility were inherited by the physical seed and according to the corruption of the physical seed through Adam, the tribe of Levi and the family

<sup>4</sup> By the time the children of Jacob left Egypt, most of them were probably not literally the "children of Jacob." During the years of captivity, the slaves that Jacob and his sons brought with them to Egypt had been absorbed into the twelve tribes. In that sense, the principle was covenantal rather than physical. Moreover, physical descent from Abraham did not guarantee the inheritance of blessing. Nevertheless, flesh remains the paradigm. Even those not descended from Abraham are called his seed and the whole nation thinks of itself as a family.

of Aaron turned away from God, like every other seed-based institution. All of this failure and sin does not mean, however, that wherever we see the word “flesh,” we should think first of corruption. Our primary association with the word “flesh” should be “Old Covenant.” Other associations follow.

### *The New Covenant*

In the New Covenant, the ruling principle is the Spirit of God. This means that the New Covenant is not built upon marriage, child-bearing, and blood-inheritance as the Old Covenant was. Rather, the church with its ceremony of baptism—adoption into the family of God—is fundamental. The church as the central institution of the New Covenant is called upon to spread the blessing of the Spirit. In doing so, she refashions the old creation into the New Covenant kingdom of God.

John the Baptist announced the coming of the new age when he said the Jews should not trust in the flesh, for God could raise up seed for Abraham from an entirely different quarter (Mt. 3:9). John said his baptism was merely water baptism, but the One was coming after him would baptize with the Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:11). Jesus fulfilled John’s words when He poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the official first day of the new age, and when He poured out fire on Jerusalem in A.D. 70, bringing to an end the ceremonial system of the Old Covenant. After Pentecost water baptism is a covenantal sign of the gift of the Spirit, which is the reason that baptism with water and the Spirit are so closely associated in the New Testament.

As a covenant initiation ceremony, water baptism is the ceremony whereby one takes upon himself the trinitarian oath of the Christian confession. Under the Old Covenant, the family was the central institution. No one could become a covenant member without being born from Adam. The first married pair were the foundation of all else. In the New Covenant era, there is a new foundation. The resurrected Christ poured out His Spirit and created a new race of men, a new family. Baptism is the adoption ceremony that officially places us into the new humanity. To be a member of the New Covenant, therefore, one must ordinarily have the seal of the new birth by the Spirit, water baptism. The Church, by administering water baptism as the symbol of Spirit baptism, becomes the basic institution. The principle of the flesh is changed to the principle of the Spirit, and the family is replaced by the Church as the central institution.



This must not be misunderstood. Authority over other institutions is not what is meant when we say the Church is the central institution of the New Covenant kingdom. The Church, in the later Middle Ages, assumed an authority that transgressed the biblical bounds of propriety. But just as the centrality of the family in the Old Covenant system did not undermine the authority of other oath-based institutions, so also the centrality of the Church as the institution that builds the kingdom does not mean that family or civil authority is insignificant or that their leaders are under the control of the Church. The three institutions exist as equals under the Word of God with each one having a distinct kingdom task within

its own realm of authority. If, then, each institution has been given equal authority under God, what does it mean to be the central insti-

**In the New Covenant, the ruling principle is the Spirit of God.**

stitution? It means that no one can enter into the kingdom of Christ without being born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:3–8), just as no one could enter the old kingdom in Adam without being born of the flesh. Baptism as the symbol and seal of that spiritual birth is the ceremony by which we are officially brought into the kingdom of the Spirit, just as circumcision, a fleshly ordinance, was the initiation ceremony for the Abrahamic covenant, an extension of the post-fall repetition of the Adamic covenant and its animal sacrifices (Gen. 3:14–24).<sup>5</sup>

Jesus promised that the gift of the Spirit would be given to those who believed in Him. John explains that Jesus was talking about what would happen after His resurrection (Jn. 7:37–39). Through His faithfulness to the Father, the Son Himself had to win the blessing of the kingdom before He could bestow it on His Church. After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to sit at the right hand of God, He poured out the blessing of the Spirit as the essential blessing of the new age, bringing His church into covenantal oneness with God. The present age, therefore, is the age of the Holy Spirit.

To say the new age is the age of the Holy Spirit is to say it is decidedly trinitarian. This age is grounded in the Father's gift of the Son, who became

<sup>5</sup> Animal sacrifice became central to ancient religion from the time of the Fall when God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins. Noah knew the distinction between clean and unclean animals, that is, which animals were appropriate for sacrifice and which were not (Gen. 7:2; 8:20–22). I think we should assume these distinctions were established after the Fall and became common knowledge.

one of us to suffer and die on the cross for us, but it could not be established until the Father and the risen Son together gave us the Spirit. This is what it means that God has become one with man in the New Covenant. The Son has been given to mankind as a member of our race, a new head and the fount of a new humanity. That alone, however, is not enough. True covenantal oneness requires the Spirit. The Son is the image of the Father, but the Spirit is the personal love proceeding from the Father to the Son and from the Son back again to the Father. In order for God and man to be one in the covenant, we must have the Spirit of God dwelling in us. His work is to unite us to God by shedding abroad in our hearts the love of God (Rom. 5:5), by which also He creates a responsive love in us (1 Jn. 4:19).

This is what is so important about the New Testament teaching that the Spirit indwells the Church and each individual Christian as well. The Holy Spirit is the personal covenant bond of love, uniting the Father and the Son in the trinitarian covenant of love. So, also, through His indwelling, the Spirit unites God and man, bringing man into the covenantal fellowship of the Trinity. Therefore, through the Spirit's sanctifying indwelling, the Son is united with His bride the Church and the Father is made one with His children, who by the Spirit cry out unto Him, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). We could not be truly one with God unless we were made to be like Christ (Rom. 8:29)—not an ontological likeness, but ethical one; not a likeness that eliminates individuality but a likeness in love by which our individuality is fully developed—which is the work of the Spirit through His indwelling.

### The Kingdom Proclamation

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter preached the first distinctly Christian sermon. It was also a distinctly trinitarian sermon. Jewish people who had come from far reaches of the Roman Empire and beyond heard the disciples praising God in their own tongues and supposed they were drunk. Peter said it was not drink that had inspired them, but the Spirit of God, whom Jesus of Nazareth—a man approved of God by signs and wonders—had bestowed upon them in fulfillment of prophecy. "You killed Him," Peter said, "but God raised Him from the dead, seated Him at His own right hand, and made Him both Lord and Christ. It is this resurrected Jesus, now become Lord, who has poured out His Spirit upon us." Peter's



message was filled with quotations from the Old Testament and was so emphatically Jewish in content that modern Christians often have a hard time following it. It is vital to understand its basic themes, however, for this message is the foundational sermon repeated in various forms throughout the book of Acts. Paul's epistles proclaim and apply the same gospel, though we tend to read him as if he were less Jewish than Peter. We need to understand that both Peter and Paul preached a worldview message that challenged their hearers and offered far more than balm for weary hearts and a promise of rest in heaven. To appreciate the full impact of the gospel, we must first take a brief look at Jesus' teaching.

## Jesus and the Kingdom

We have become so accustomed to thinking of the gospel as a message of salvation for the individual soul that we often forget what Jesus actually said. The Gospel of Mark begins by telling us that Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14). Mark records these words of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:15). This raises at least two basic questions. What did Jesus mean by "the kingdom of God"? And, since Jesus said it was near, we wonder, what happened? Did it come? When we answer these questions, we will understand the answer to a third question: Why is the gospel said to be the proclamation of the kingdom of God?

As we have seen, the kingdom of God is a major theme of the Bible and a central aspect of a biblical view of the world. The expression "kingdom of God" and its equivalents occur frequently in Scripture, but it is used in more than one sense. First, the kingdom of God refers to the whole world that God created and rules over. In this broad sense, the kingdom was established at creation and continues forever. Second, when God created the world, He granted representative rule and authority to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26–28). But when man sinned, de facto rule fell into the hands of Satan. From the time of the fall of Adam until the coming of Christ, the kingdom of God was in captivity, so to speak. Satan could offer the kingdoms of this world to Jesus (Mt. 4:8–9) because he was actually

**The kingdom Jesus announced was a restoration of the kingdom God had given to man at the original creation.**

(though not ultimately) in charge of them. Third, when Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near, He was referring to the restored kingdom that He promised to build. Satan would be overthrown and the kingdom would be restored to man. But the work of restoration would be in stages. Just as the individual believer grows in wisdom and grace in the process of sanctification, so, too, the kingdom of God comes in stages—the initial definitive stage, the progressive realization stage, and the final glorious stage.

The kingdom that Jesus announced, then, was a restoration of the kingdom that God had given to man at the original creation. The subsequent invasion of that kingdom by Satan and the revolt of man against the heavenly King did not remove God from His throne, but it did undermine the recognition of His kingship among men. Satan so utterly dominated the world after Adam that by the time of Noah, only one family in the entire world was faithful to God. Even after God restored the kingdom through Abraham and his descendents, mankind's tendency to sin still dominated history until the time of Christ. When Jesus announced that the kingdom was near, He was alluding to Daniel's prophecies of the four successive kingdoms—Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—that would be central to God's covenant program until the Messiah came from heaven to establish a neverending kingdom (Dan. 2:34–35, 44).

This very brief survey of the meaning of the phrase “kingdom of God” reveals how important the concept is in the Christian worldview, for it encompasses the whole of world history. It is also important for another reason. We pointed out that God established man as His representative on earth to rule the creation. Representation is the very essence of the covenant. God the triune Lord created the world as His kingdom and gave the kingdom to man so that man could share in God's rule and authority. The kingdom is a vital aspect of what it means for man to be created in the image of the triune God and to be brought into the fellowship of the trinitarian Persons. Adam disobeyed God and rejected the covenant, thereby losing the kingdom. Christ, the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), was faithful to the Father, even unto death, and won the blessing of the covenant: the right to rule the kingdom (Mt. 28:18).

This leads to our second question: Did the kingdom actually come? It should be clear that if it did not come, then the gospel that Jesus announced



would be rendered invalid and so would His work and ministry. However, Paul tells us clearly that the kingdom did come.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)

We see why the church in the book of Acts emphasized the resurrection of Christ. Without the resurrection, Jesus would have been no more than a Messianic pretender, another in a long list of failed heroes. But Jesus did not fail. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. All power in heaven and earth was given to Him (Mt. 28:18). Did the kingdom He announced come? Yes, it did. In his earthly life, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was near. After the resurrection, Paul and the apostles proclaimed that the kingdom had come. Of course, the apostles preached the message of salvation for the individual by grace through faith, but this message was not really new. Moses and David also taught salvation by grace through faith (Rom. 4). What was new was the message that the Messiah had come, as God had promised, and that He had defeated all His enemies on the cross, and that God had raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the right hand of the majesty on high. With the resurrection of Jesus, a new age had come. The kingdom of God was established in history, and the failure of the old Adam had been reversed by the new Adam. Under the New Covenant, Jesus is now building a new temple and leading His people to a New Jerusalem.

## The Gospel and the Kingdom

The gospel is the proclamation that the evil of Satan and the sin of Adam have been reversed. The sin of Adam brought judgment not only on Adam

personally but also on the entire world he represented, including the human race and the rest of creation under his authority. Because of Adam's sin, the Old Covenant could only bring a curse and the whole era of the Old Covenant was under the curse. Jesus Christ came not merely to save a few lost souls out of the world, but to take away the curse and bring in a completely new world. It is not a question of either saving the world or saving sinners. The most frequently quoted verse in the New Testament is followed by a verse that shows that the salvation of individuals and the salvation of the world go together.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (Jn. 3:16–17)

The Son of God came to save each individual who believes in Him and to save the world. Thus, the angels announcing Jesus' birth spoke of peace on earth and good will among men (Lk. 2:14). God was in Christ "reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Elsewhere, Paul explains that it pleased the Father to reconcile all things to Himself through Christ, whether things on earth or things in heaven (Col. 1:20). It is hard to imagine a more comprehensive statement.

When we speak of the gospel as a declaration of the kingdom, therefore, we are saying it has worldview significance. It is a declaration of God's work in history that defines the world in which we live and the meaning and role of the Church. Most Christians are accustomed to think of salvation as something that happens only to individual believers, not as God's overall work to reconcile the world to Himself. In Paul's day, the opposite was probably true—that God's work in history was the overarching perspective. Given our orientation, however, it may help us to understand the larger picture of salvation if we first review the process of individual salvation.

**Jesus came both to save individuals and to save the world.**

When we believe in Christ, we are justified (Rom. 5:1). This is God's definitive declaration that our sins are forgiven and we are accepted as righteous before Him. Justification is objective, outside of us. But salvation has a subjective side also. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts to lead us to faith



and make us new creatures in Christ. Whereas we used to hate God, He has definitively changed us into those who love Him. This change in our hearts begins a process of transformation that is called sanctification. In sanctification, the Holy Spirit works in us to change our hearts so that day by day we become more like Christ. Our salvation will be complete when the Last Day comes and Christ raises all men from the dead. We shall be given a new resurrection body and live with God forever. This is glorification. Most Christians are well acquainted with this three-stage picture of salvation. Referring to different aspects of God's saving grace, we can say

I have been saved (justification).

I am being saved (sanctification).

I shall be saved (glorification).

The New Testament perspective on history and the kingdom of God follows a similar three-stage process. The Bible speaks of the kingdom of God as past, present, and future. It was established in the past by Jesus' death and resurrection. It is being established today through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It will be established in the future when Christ returns in glory. When Paul says that all things have been reconciled to God through Jesus' death, he is speaking of that past and definitive salvation. When Paul says that Jesus is now seated at God's right hand, fighting to overcome every enemy, he is speaking of the present process of history as the outworking of kingdom salvation (1 Cor. 15:25). When Paul says that the world will be transformed at Jesus' coming, he is speaking of the culmination of the work of salvation. The gospel, then, is the good news that the Son of God has come and transformed the world by bringing in the kingdom of God. Because the salvation of the individual is incorporation into that kingdom, Paul says God "delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Col. 1:13). We have been freed from the shackles of the evil kingdom and led into the kingdom of God's love.

Although we are new creatures in Christ, the sin of Adam still clings to us. Our old and new natures will battle each other until our redemption in Christ is complete. In the same way, two ages exist simultaneously during the present era. On the one hand, the world of the Old Covenant continues.

Satan is the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). The rulers of the world are the rulers of this age, an age which is passing away (1 Cor. 2:6, 8). On the other hand, Christ has defeated the devil. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. He has inherited a kingdom that will never pass away. Now, all power and authority are His as He sits on the throne at God's right hand.

We now understand the deeper meaning of the gospel, when Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was near. We also see why the early church so emphasized the resurrection—it was through Christ's resurrection and ascension that the kingdom of God was established. The original kingdom of God, created in the beginning and corrupted through the sin of Adam, has now been redeemed by the work of Jesus. He brought in a new age and commanded His church to work with Him to complete the vision of the new kingdom.

## The Great Commission and the Kingdom

Every Christian is familiar with the Great Commission. It is the subject of countless sermons but it is not often understood as a kingdom mandate. It has been separated from the kingdom Jesus proclaimed as the gospel and treated as if it were something entirely different: a message of salvation for the individual alone. This undermines the true meaning and place of the Great Commission in the Christian worldview. In order to appreciate its broader worldview significance, we will reconsider the Great Commission in the light of the kingdom message of the New Testament. Here are the words of the commission as recorded by Matthew:

[1] All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [2] Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, [3] baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [4] teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; [5] and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Mt. 28:18–20)

First, each of the five sections of the commission must be interpreted in the kingdom context that the commission itself demands, as can be seen from the very first words. In the introductory words of the commission we see that Jesus' command is grounded in His claim to have all authority in heaven and on earth. This is an unambiguous claim to kingship. The words



“in heaven and on earth” define His realm as broadly as possible: He rules the whole of created reality. The words “all authority” mean He has the highest conceivable authority within the broadest possible realm. When Paul confesses Christ as Lord, he is confessing that Jesus has supreme authority in heaven and on earth. The Great Commission, therefore, is a mandate from an absolute king and sovereign.

Second, we need to carefully define the command itself. Jesus did not say that the disciples should go into all the nations and win a few souls for heaven. The Greek word translated into English as “make disciples of” could be translated as a verb, so that the command would read, “Disciple the nations.” This makes the English much closer to the actual Greek meaning of bringing all the nations of the world

into submission to Christ, for the object of the Greek verb “disciple” is “all the nations.”

**The Great Commission must be interpreted in the kingdom context.**

Every nation in the world must be trans-

formed into a nation of Christ’s disciples. In other words, the King of kings is commanding His apostles to conquer the world. This is surely not a war to be fought with the carnal weapons of the flesh, but we completely misunderstand the Great Commission if we see it as anything less than a command to convert the world into Jesus’ kingdom. It must be noted also that the word *disciple* here means “Christian.”

Third, Jesus told His disciples to baptize the nations into the name of the triune God. Baptism is an oath-taking ceremony, in which the person baptized swears allegiance to the triune Lord.<sup>6</sup> He confesses to believe in the one name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. By receiving baptism, he takes a covenant oath and is officially and publicly (“where two or more are gathered”) declared a Christian. In the book of Acts, we see how the early church carried out baptism. When, for example, the Philippian jailer and his family believed, they were baptized immediately, in the middle of the night in their own home (Acts 16:31–34). Profession of faith and

<sup>6</sup> Churches approach the doctrine of baptism differently, but a discussion of various views of baptism is not within the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that each view of baptism fits the covenant paradigm. Those who believe in infant baptism emphasize representation and the covenant promises to the family. The profession of faith required from the individual in credo-baptism (baptism of those who make a credible profession) is the prerequisite of the representative who brings the infant in paedobaptism.

baptism are so closely associated in time and meaning that they are treated as virtually synonymous (Acts 22:16).

Fourth, disciples are not made simply by baptism. They must be taught, also. The order given here is the order we see in the book of Acts. Upon profession of faith, baptism is immediately administered. After baptism, teaching begins. The teaching Jesus commands here focuses especially on the daily life of the Christian. We are “to observe all things” that He has commanded us. This does not exclude doctrine, but it does emphasize practice more than modern Christians normally do. In the context of Christ’s declaration that He holds absolute authority in heaven and on earth, this aspect of the commission means the disciple must be taught to live his life in submission to Christ’s lordship. In baptism, the believer has taken a kingdom oath. Now he must be trained in the kingdom ethic.

Fifth, Jesus promised His disciples He would be with them. Jesus is using common language from the Old Testament, the language of covenant promise. The promise occurs, for example, in the story of Jacob. The meaning is unmistakable. When God appeared to Jacob on his journey to Padan Aram, He said: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you” (Gen. 28:15). Variations on this expression are used about one hundred times in the Old Testament. It is so important as a covenant promise that it is one of the names of the Messiah: *Immanuel*, “God with us” (Mt. 1:23). Jesus’ promise to be with the Church is a promise that the work of discipling the nations will be successful. This promise is the same promise God gave Joshua when He sent him to conquer the land of Canaan: “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. . . . Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:5, 9). Israel’s success was not dependent upon human strength or wisdom, but upon the presence and power of her Lord. It is no different for the Church.

What we have in the Great Commission, then, is a kingdom mandate. It is not a mandate to conquer by force, but a command to spread the kingdom of Christ by the Word of Christ. The apostles of Christ set the example for the Church. None of them led armies into battle or conquered pagans by the power of the sword. What they did was preach.



Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:20–25)

In this, they were imitating Jesus, who preached the gospel of the kingdom of God and did good works. The apostles also imitated Jesus in suffering for their faith—most, if not all of them, suffered and died for the sake of the gospel. Jesus conquered Satan by the cross and calls His people to the way of the cross (Lk. 14:25–27). This means self-denial and suffering for the sake of the truth. Even when Christians gain the ascendancy in society and hold lawful authority, they must still battle sin in this world. Only those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness will obtain God's blessing. The imitation of the life of Christ is the essence of the Christian ethic (1 Jn. 2:6) and the true way of spreading God's kingdom.

## Conclusion

In the Christian view of the world as God's kingdom, there are two phases. The first phase is the phase of the flesh. Had man not sinned, this phase would have been simply an immature state, for nothing in the flesh itself is inherently evil. Man is not a sinner because he is finite or because he is physical. Sin is the perversion of man's relationship with God through disobedience to God's gracious command.

Because of man's sin, the second phase of the kingdom, the phase of the Spirit, could not be realized apart from paying the wages of sin. God the Son paid the price we could not pay. He came in the flesh in order to die for our sins and to defeat Satan. Through death, He accomplished the plan of God from the beginning of creation, which is the meaning of the incarnation: the union of God and man in the covenant. Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God brought a man into heaven to sit beside the Father and share His rule. The gift of the Spirit to the Church brings a

whole new race of man to God, to share in His covenant rule, as Adam and Eve should have, had they not sinned. Even more, the gift of the Spirit of God establishes the covenant bond of love. God has given His Son to be one of us and His Spirit to dwell in us. The new humanity is one with Him in love. The future of time and eternity is the neverending realization of the infinite riches and glory of God's love in Christ.

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:14–21)

## Review Questions

1. What is “Christocracy” and how is it important for Christian faith?
2. Explain how the idea of a “kingdom” is included in various worldviews.
3. Compare and contrast various non-Christian views of the kingdom.
4. Where does the kingdom begin in the biblical worldview?
5. How does the kingdom change when God brings in the New Covenant?
6. Compare and contrast the institutions of the kingdom in the Old and New Covenants.
7. What did Jesus mean when He announced the kingdom of God?
8. Did the kingdom Jesus announced come? Explain.
9. Explain what it means to say that the gospel is a kingdom proclamation.
10. Explain the Great Commission as a kingdom mandate.



## 9. Trinity, Self, and Church

GOD SAID that it is not good for man to be alone. In context, of course, this meant that man needed a wife to be his helper. In a larger sense, though, it is important to understand that God created man not only as an individual but also as a collective, a society. For God Himself is a triune God subsisting in three Persons united in a covenant of love. We are accustomed to the idea that man as an individual is godlike in his body and mind, godlike in his abilities, godlike in his rule over the creation, for this truth has been emphasized often, especially in the West. We may be less familiar with the fact that, from a biblical perspective, man's social nature and responsibilities are essential to what it means to be made in God's image, so that apart from righteous participation in the societies in which God has placed us, we cannot be truly Christian.

### Worldview and Society

Religions typically endorse certain social arrangements, so much so in fact that many people think the primary meaning and purpose of religion is social. This view is wrong, but the error is understandable. Considering the social visions of various religions, it may indeed appear that the Marxist critique of religion had a basis in truth. Some religions seem to be little more than tools wielded by the powerful elite to keep the masses in submission. Hinduism with its caste system stands out as perhaps the most glaring

example of religion supporting the privileged classes. Even in the case of Hinduism, however, there is clearly more to religion than just a clever method of protecting the powerbrokers. By providing structure and order, successful religions help protect society from a breakdown in trust and relationships that would spell social chaos.

Evidently, then, the relationship between religion and society is important. In fact, every religion and worldview must have a conception of the ideal society. Worldviews have to address not only questions about what it means for the human individual to be whole and free, but also questions about human society. After all, many of our problems are distinctly social, and a worldview or religion that leaves out this dimension fails. Just as they

**Man's social nature is essential to what it means to be made in God's image.**

offer a standard for the understanding of the individual man, usually through the example of a great leader, all religions have something to say about the ideal human group. This provides a very practical testing point for a worldview and suggests

a number of important questions that any worldview must answer. For example, how does the social ideal of a particular religion or worldview fit with its ultimate view of reality? How do the social ideal and the individual ideal relate? What is the ethic of the ideal society, and how does that ethic relate to the understanding of ultimate reality? What is the ultimate meaning of human society?

Before we turn to the specifically Christian view of society, it may be helpful to consider some of these basic questions in broad terms. The following is an overview of how various religious worldviews approach these issues.

## Society and Ultimate Reality

Is human society a reflection of the ultimate reality? If a worldview answers in the negative, the value of human society is greatly reduced, for whatever meaning society, as such, possesses can be at best ephemeral. If God or reality is a unity, in the end all diversity and multiplicity tend to be absorbed into the all-encompassing One. What does this mean in everyday terms? It might mean that the understanding of salvation will not include groups, or tribes, or nations, but be restricted to the individual, with all individuals



eventually being merged into one. Consider Buddhism, for example. In most forms of Buddhism, there is no personal ultimate and, since the ultimate reality is non-personal, persons in relation are not a major concern. There is no vision of a new society or a new world in which men live in harmony and everlasting peace. Salvation, rather, is release from the human condition. When the individual obtains release, he is also released from all concerns to be an individual.

There are other approaches and, because of the borrowing of ideas, we often find “happy inconsistencies” in a worldview. Islam and Judaism, along with some Christian cults, supply good examples. God, in these religions, is often conceived of as a monad, an absolute One in whom there is no diversity. But because of the Bible’s influence, these religions often have more to offer than their view of god would suggest. Their ideas of society and law, family life, eschatology, etcetera, all betray biblical influence. Still, we must ask, what meaning does human society have in a religion in which the god is eternally alone, a non-social being? What is the point of a solitary god creating a world and filling it with people? What can man say to such an impersonal deity?

Hinduism, on the other hand, is usually polytheistic. There are multiple gods, forming a rather less-than-ideal society of their own. In some forms of Hinduism, these gods and their problems are not really ultimate. They are pieces of a larger impersonal system. We are back, in other words, to the supremacy of the one. Polytheistic forms of Hinduism see history as an endless succession of ages, with a golden age in the past and perhaps another one in the future. But the vision here is clearly not ultimate because Hinduism lacks the spiritual impetus to envision such things. Within our present age, Hinduism’s caste system, though defining a particular kind of social order, constitutes an antisocial arrangement insofar as it declares certain people to be “outcastes,” not because they committed a crime but simply because they were born into the wrong family. Nor does Hinduism tolerate a view of future salvation in which caste distinctions have finally been overcome and a new society emerges.

We may be more familiar with the polytheism of ancient Greece and Rome. Peter Leithart describes the perspective of their ancient myths as follows:

If the gods are as the Greek myths depict them, then, as Hesiod's work suggests, warfare and conflict are the ultimate reality. Gods and goddesses compete and fight with one another, promoting the good of their favorites and opposing their enemies among men. Peace is inherently impossible in a polytheistic world. This, I will suggest, is responsible for the despair that C. S. Lewis said pervades the Homeric epics. Homer vividly depicts the horror and waste of war (as well as its glories and beauties), but he can see no way of life other than war. How could he? If the gods themselves are at war, how can we expect peace on earth—ever?<sup>1</sup>

## Society and Individual

Another fundamental question concerns the relationship between society and the individual. A religion in which the ultimate reality is impersonal or in which god is a monad will obviously face problems in relating the individual and the society. Within the ultimate reality itself, in these religions, there is nothing at all corresponding to such a relationship. All the problems we pointed out concerning views of society are complicated by the fact that in these worldviews, even if the individual finds meaning of sorts in his relationship to god or to whatever the ultimate reality is perceived to be, his relationships to other people have no transcendent or absolute guide. Once again, it must be noted, Judaism and Islam (and some Christian cults), in spite of the fact that they view god as a one for whom personal relationships are not ultimately relevant, do take seriously the relationship between society and the individual. They have a long and complex history of law, giving concrete expression to their intent to preserve social harmony. Family is important to them, as are collective worship and other religious and social acts. But these are all borrowed virtues, not the expression of the heart of these religious faiths.

## Society and Ethics

For religions influenced by the Bible, there is a clear distinction between right and wrong, ultimately known through the commandments of God. It would be a mistake, however, to think that these related religions endorse

<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man: A Christian Guide to Select Ancient Literature* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999), 20.



more or less the same ethic. Profound differences exist. Islam's belief in polygamy is an outstanding example. The social, cultural, and economic impact of this practice, not to mention the personal and interpersonal costs, is staggering. Also, because Mohammed's life is an ethical standard, war as a means of spreading Islam's realm and religious influence has Allah's endorsement.

In other religions, such as Mahayana Buddhism, no distinctions can be considered fundamental, not even the distinction between right and wrong.

Inherently there are no distinctions between the process of life and the process of destruction; people make a discrimination and call one birth and the other death. In action there is no discrimination between right and wrong, but people make a distinction for their own convenience.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that Buddhism has nothing to say about right and wrong, but it does mean that Buddhist ethical instruction is placed in a framework in which ethical action has no ultimate meaning. Though this might seem to imply that Buddhism's Eightfold Path has nothing special to offer, it really means that following the Path will take us beyond distinctions. It should not lead to reckless living because the Path is the way to be liberated from all desire, and desire is considered to be the source of our problems. However, it remains true that in the pantheistic worldviews that tend to dominate the Orient, the distinction between good and evil cannot be pressed too far, for that would undermine the fundamental oneness of all. One concrete result is that whatever ethics remain are vague, leaving no clear standard for society, a lacuna with profound political significance.

Junichi Kyogoku, writing of the Japanese cosmos of meaning, observes that the vague pantheistic ethic of the Orient leads to deep problems in the political life of a nation.

The traditional cosmos of meaning has other consequences. First, setting aside the political considerations based on secular pragmatism, there is no moral restraint against the corruption of power. There is no ethic based on moral commandments laid down by a transcendent creator-god, nor is there the tradition of prophets who transmit the righteous anger of the creator-god to those in power.

<sup>2</sup> *The Teaching of Buddha*, 121st revised edition (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1985).

Apart from the mandarin morality of Confucianism, there is no justification in the traditional cosmos of meaning for demanding that those in power practice self-reflection and self-restraint. Hence, the arrogance of power, the hubris that does not have to be afraid of the nemesis of the gods, and the boundless corruption and evil of power become a matter of course.<sup>3</sup>

## Society and Meaning

What is the meaning of the fact that man is a social being? For the Hindu and the Buddhist there is no real answer to this question, just as there is no real answer to the question of the meaning of man's personhood. After all, if the ultimate reality is an impersonal One, personal reality is lower-level reality at best. Since the world comes from and returns to the One, all distinctions eventually fade away, including the distinctions among persons and their social relationships. Ironically, a similar problem confronts Islam and Judaism also, in spite of their biblical roots and their belief in a heaven as an ideal society. Because their god is not a social being, nothing social can reflect his nature or be essential to his attributes. Society as such is utterly foreign to his being. Why should such a god create a society, and what is the purpose and meaning of society? It is difficult to answer. Any view of god as an absolute One gives rise to other questions: Is society an eternal reality, or will the human race be amalgamated into an amorphous metaphysical mass? What do social distinctions mean, and why are we created differently? Will there be differences in eternity? Judaism and Islam, drawing on biblical revelation, may be able to offer the standard catechetical answers, but they cannot offer truly theological answers that accord with the nature of the triune God.

**The Christian God is a society of three Persons who are one Being.**

## Conclusion

This brief survey addressed some of the basic issues a worldview faces with regard to God and society. Compared to those of other worldviews, the

<sup>3</sup> Junichi Kyogoku, "The Japanese Cosmos of Meaning," *The Japan Times* (Sunday, March 2, 1986): 6.



Christian answers to these questions are fundamentally different and internally consistent because the Christian God is a Trinity, a society of three Persons who are one Being. Since God Himself is a society, man as God's image must also be a society, though, as we have seen, it is also true that man as an individual reflects God. Furthermore, the renewed society of heaven will manifest the harmony and oneness of God in the covenantal love of God's children for one another. Just as the three Persons of the Trinity share a covenant of love, individual believers in Christian society are related by covenant to God and to one another. The perfect harmony of the One and the Many in God means that men experience the harmony of the One and the Many in society when they are in conformity to God's will. Though perfect harmony never comes to fruition in this world of sin, it will characterize the social life of the resurrected society of the New Jerusalem. Ethics for man simply means being like God, for He is a God of love. Christians do not appeal to an abstract standard to answer questions of ultimate good. They look to the interpersonal relationships of the three Persons of the Trinity to find the ultimate definition of good and right. In terms of the everyday affairs of life, we find these answers spelled out for us in the ethical instruction in Scripture. Finally, the Bible holds forth the most amazing promise for the ultimate meaning of human society. The redeemed race of man is a new society called the Church. It is also called the Bride of Christ because the covenant relationship between Christ and the Church is analogous to marriage. Christ the husband gave His life to save the Bride. It is His joy to glorify her and enjoy her forever.

Beyond these general answers to basic questions, we need to give closer consideration to the Christian and trinitarian view of society. We will explore in more depth the modern worldview and its individualistic presuppositions, for the influence of this thinking permeates not only non-Christian views, but also Christian thought. Learning to think in trinitarian terms requires us to renew our minds and perhaps change our lifestyles also.

### **Self and Society in Individualism**

In the West, individualism reigns. It may not be fair to blame Descartes entirely, but his approach to philosophy and knowledge had a tremendous impact on the history of Western thought. His philosophy is no longer

accepted as a legitimate answer to the questions he posed, but the method of doubt introduced in his works haunts the modern mind. For Descartes, systematic doubt meant doubting all that could be doubted, including sense experience, the existence of the external world, and memory. Doubting all that he could doubt, however, led him to this conclusion:

But I immediately realized that, though I wanted to think that everything was false, it was necessary that the “me” who was doing the thinking was something; and noticing that this truth—I think, therefore I am—was so certain and sure that all the wildest suppositions of skeptics could not shake it, I judged that I could unhesitatingly accept it as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking.

Descartes could not doubt that he doubted and that he himself was doing the doubting. Thus, *cogito ergo sum*—I think therefore I am. Apart from whether or not this is a legitimate procedure for obtaining certain knowledge, the Cartesian method is a form of radical individualism. Apparently even the existence of God is considered more dubitable than Descartes’s doubting Self. The ultimate ground for knowledge is found in the subjective workings of the mind. Only the inner self, the “ghost in the machine,” knows itself. This is true knowledge. Whatever else the self admits into its store of knowledge comes from extension outward.

Though postmodern philosophy has rejected Cartesian individualism, there is still a strong popular tendency to think as if Descartes’s approach was undeniable truth. We suppose we exist as individuals in our own inner world. Only the individual himself has access to this inner world, the real self. The roles we play in society virtually reduce to tools by which the inner self manipulates the world around it. Other people are unknown and unknowable independent selves like us, hidden beneath flesh and hair. Relationships transcend the ephemeral only if they cross the boundaries of physical reality and reach into the spirit. The body often interferes with the reality inside, but it counts for nothing; only the individual and spiritual are real.

**There is still a strong popular tendency to think as if Descartes’s approach was undeniable truth.**

Descartes’s method is not only anti-Christian, it is also absurd. No man is an island, nor does any man gain knowledge independently. We know and learn through our relationships with others. Our mothers began teaching us



language and the simple principles of ethics from the day we left the womb. We learned from our mothers not by doubting everything we could doubt, but by believing everything we heard. Only after we learned to believe were we able to doubt. Doubt is based upon faith. It is a method, not for discovering the foundations for thought, but for refining the rough edges of faith and bringing it more into line with God's words.

## Trinity and Society

To understand man fully, therefore, we must understand him as he relates to others. The self is not a ghost hidden down deep somewhere in a fleshly machine. Our self—who we are—is determined by our relationships, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are who they are in their mutual relationships. There is no Father unless He is the Father of the Son. The Spirit is who He is because He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. In God, relationships among the members of the Trinity are essential to the definition, or the name, of each of the three Persons. Since we are created in God's image, we, too, are defined, or named, in terms of our relationships.<sup>4</sup>

## Mankind

First, our racial name "man" relates us to God as His image. This is our most fundamental and essential relationship. It is only because we are individuals before God that our individuality stands. Apart from God, human individuality is merely biological; man's inner stuff comes through social interaction and man has no individual "soul." In the Christian view, God has made us individual persons in His image and we stand before Him as real individuals. This is most evident at the end of time. Whatever the social dimensions of final judgment, the Bible clearly indicates it will be judgment of individuals. Relationship to the Creator is essential to meaningful individuality.

**Our self is determined  
by our relationships.**

<sup>4</sup> Please note that I indicate in the following section that our first and most fundamentally defining relationship is our relationship to God. In saying that we are defined by our relationships, I do not mean that we are only or primarily defined by our relationships to other people.

It is also an inescapable relationship. No matter how much a man hates God and wishes to be rid of the burdens of responsibility before him, there is no place to run, no place to hide.

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
 Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
 If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:  
 If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there.  
 If I take the wings of the morning,  
 And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
 Even there shall thy hand lead me,  
 And thy right hand shall hold me.  
 If I say, Surely the darkness shall overwhelm me,  
 And the light about me shall be night;  
 Even the darkness hideth not from thee,  
 But the night shineth as the day:  
 The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.  
 For thou didst form my inward parts:  
 Thou didst cover me in my mother's womb. (Ps. 139:7–13, ASV)

We are therefore named “Adam,” the Hebrew word for man, because we are descendants of the first Adam, the image of the triune God. Both male and female are equally God’s image, but the man was the representative and covenantal head, and therefore his name is the name of the race. The name “man” for the whole race brings us in relationship to all other men as well as to God. We are one race, with one father and mother, and therefore, at the physical, racial level, a single family (Acts 17:26).

### **In Adam, In Christ**

Because we are a single family descended from Adam and Eve, all hatred and bias based upon physical differences among races is perverse and pointless. But there is an enmity among men that runs deeper than tribal or racial hatred. When Adam and Eve sinned, God spoke to them about the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). The antipathy between these two subdivisions of the race of man is spiritual and covenantal. Since the Fall, men have taken sides with Cain or Abel. The spiritual rift between the two families of man is based on covenantal loyalty to God, not upon



physical characteristics or ancestry. The seed of the serpent are the covenant breakers who live as if the God of the Bible were not God, as if they had the right to decide good and evil for themselves. The seed of the woman are the covenant keepers, who, like their mother Eve, have repented of their sins and trust in the grace of God for their salvation. The old race of man is defined by its relationship to Adam; the new race of man is defined by its relationship to Christ.

The covenantal headships of Adam and Christ come to concrete expression through a complex web of relationships that vary in importance and influence. We are indebted to our ancestors for most of our physical characteristics. Perhaps no other influence on who we are is greater than that of our immediate family and close friends, but all our relationships—other friends and family members, co-workers, neighbors, social acquaintances, even internet friendships—have meaning for who we are, though how much each relationship psychologically shapes a person varies from person to person and over time.<sup>5</sup>

## Two Covenantal Oaths, Two Institutions

Of our relationships, two are normally fundamental to our personhood in a qualitatively distinct manner. First, because the family is a covenantal unit, family relationships have a meaning more basic than any others. They are the most important influence on us during the years when we are most easily and deeply influenced. Second, the Church is also a covenantal unit. Just as the covenantal oath between a man and woman creates the family, so, too, the covenant bond of God created the Church. God created the Church by the baptism of His Spirit on the day of Pentecost. New believers are added to the Church by water baptism, in part a symbolic repetition of the baptism of Pentecost.

When we think of the covenant oaths of marriage and baptism, it becomes clear that the Cartesian self is not the Christian self. When a man and woman marry, the two become “one flesh.” There is a sense, of course,

<sup>5</sup> This may seem to reduce the self to a collage and one in constant flux at that. For man outside of Christ, that may not be an entirely inaccurate depiction. The Christian's truest self is still in the future. When he is perfectly conformed to Christ, the Christian man is finally himself. All of the other influences on his life are coherently related and the man himself is at rest.

in which this describes a life-long process of learning. But there is a more basic sense in which the oneness of marriage is created at the moment the covenant oath is pronounced. Once a man and woman say, "I do," they can never be the same again. From that point on, they are defined before God and man in terms of their faithfulness to each another. Their responsibilities to one another take precedence over every other human relationship and are subordinate only to their responsibilities to God. If either one should break the marriage oath, it has profound significance for both persons psychologically, socially, and religiously. However true it may be that some marriages do not develop as they should, the objective covenantal realities remain, and God deals with husbands and wives in terms of that covenant.

Baptism must be understood in a similar light. Baptism is the covenant-oath ceremony of initiation into the Christian Church, the family of God. When we are baptized, God's oath of promise is given to us through His representatives in the Church, but the baptized person binds himself by oath also. From the moment we are baptized, our name is changed. We are

**Church and family are fundamental covenantal institutions through which we manifest God's social character.**

called "Christian," a follower of Christ. We are called the children of God and members of the church, the body and bride of Christ. However we respond to baptism, whatever we may feel or not feel, the cov-

enant of baptism has brought us into a new relationship with Jesus the Messiah and with His Church. This new relationship brings obligations upon us even as it blesses us with infinitely wonderful promises.

If we think of the true self as the Cartesian individualized soul, then Church membership, baptism, weekly worship, and so on, are not really important. If the real inner self is connected to God by faith, all the external aspects of my relationship to God and man are secondary. But this is not at all the way the Bible teaches us to think. In the Bible, for all practical purposes, the notion of Christian life apart from membership in a local church never occurs. To reject baptism, the Lord's Supper, and weekly worship is to reject the body of Christ, the bride He loves. From a biblical perspective, this is tantamount to rejecting salvation, for Jesus came to save His Church, not a conglomeration of unrelated individuals. However much a person in the days of Noah might have believed in God, if he refused to get into the ark, he died in the flood. There was no salvation outside of the ark. The ark



is a picture of Christ, of course, but the Church is His body. Therefore, in a secondary sense, the ark also pictures the Church.

Each local church is a visible manifestation of the whole body of those who believe. Therefore, Paul calls the local church the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 3:16–17). This is the same kind of language used to describe the final Church in heaven. Local churches, in other words, are not-yet-perfected manifestations of the one true Church in a particular area. It is not normally possible to be a citizen of the New Jerusalem without also being a member of some local church, worshipping Christ regularly and working together with others to build His kingdom. Being a Christian includes bearing the responsibility for world missions together with other Christians, working with others so that every nation of the world may be brought into covenant with Christ (Mt. 28:18–20). The Church is called to preach the gospel and to baptize and train Christians to obey Christ's commands. The early Church met weekly on Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, to study the Bible, pray, sing, and take communion. We see from Paul's letters that some of these churches had serious problems, but we never see Christians going it alone, as if local church membership were an option.

So then, these two institutions of church and family are fundamental covenantal institutions, established by God for man so that we can manifest His social character through faithfulness to a covenant of love.

## The Family as a Covenantal Institution

The meaning of the family as a social institution is distinct and special. Its nature and various functions make it foundational to social life. At the very beginning of the Old Covenant, the family was the first social institution. Though we are in the New Covenant historically, we still live in the Old Covenant world—the world that was created for Adam and Eve. Men and women still marry and have children. As a race, man is still seeking to fulfill the commission God gave to Adam. The family, the institution for generational continuity and growth, retains its centrality in this regard. God has ordained that sexual relationships be limited to husband and wife so that children will be born into families. Since children constitute the future of society, the institution to which children are committed controls the future. Whatever individual men may do, or however some societies may twist and

denigrate the meaning of the family, the institution of the family is foundational to society. If the family is weak, the whole social structure begins to fail. When the family is undermined, the walls of society collapse. Without the God-ordained institution of the family, society can barely be said to exist. Without a healthy family life, no society can thrive. In this regard it is worthy of note that the prophet Micah, decrying the breakdown of the society in his day, exclaimed,

For son dishonors father,  
Daughter rises against her mother,  
Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
A man's enemies are the men of his own household. (Micah 7:6)

Second, the family holds a special place in the biblical view of society because of its nature. When God created human society in the Garden of Eden, He created a society of love: one man and one woman united in the bond of matrimony. However much the Old Covenant is inferior to the new, from the beginning, the nature of the covenant and society was covenantal love. Man as the image of the triune God of love was created to express His love in his primordial relationships. No human has ever existed that was not born from that first love. If man had not sinned, generation by generation, the love of the covenant would have been extended as the race of man grew.

The covenant love between husband and wife is the essential family love. It comes before parental love and normally remains after it. Through that covenant love, children are born. Children learn to love their parents in response to parental love. As they grow, they learn to love others and the love of the immediate family extends to the larger family, to friends and neighbors, to the local church, and eventually to people they will never meet, living in places they will never visit. Through works of charity and missionary giving, family love is extended to all mankind. When children grow up and marry, the process of nurturing and extending family love begins again.

Third, in the modern West our egalitarian urge leads us to assume that true love erases hierarchy. By contrast, love in the biblical worldview respects hierarchy. Though the three Persons of the Trinity are equal in essence and in the possession of all divine attributes, there is order and structure in their relationships. Trinitarian love does not belittle or erase the structure but is



expressed precisely in terms of it. This does not mean there can be no such thing as a relationship among equals. Among men, such relationships express the equality of essence among the three Persons of the Godhead. But family relationships in the Bible are structured. The husband, under Christ, is the head of the home. The wife is commanded to submit to him and the children are to submit to father and mother.

In America, *submission* is a four-letter word.<sup>6</sup> It smacks of patriarchy and oppression of women. By contrast, in the Bible, the Son submits to the Father and always does His will. The Spirit submits to the Father and the Son. Submission and hierarchy, then, are essential to our view of God. As we pointed out before, biblical leadership includes a type of submission as well so that the idea of submission does not reduce to servitude, and hierarchy does not become subjugation. Jesus taught His disciples that the one who served would be the true leader, imitating Him in the way He gave His life to save His people. Husbands are called to sacrifice themselves for their wives (Eph. 5:25 ff.) and parents are called to sacrifice for their children (Prov. 13:22; 19:14). In every case, the leader is the one who is called upon to make the greatest sacrifice and faces the heaviest burden. Love is the fulfillment of those responsibilities in obedience to God, which includes respecting the hierarchical structures He established.

Fourth, in the Bible, responsibility for the education of children falls squarely on parents' shoulders. This does not mean that no one but father and mother should be the teachers. It does mean that whether they do the teaching themselves or hire others to do it for them, parents bear the responsibility for the intellectual and moral training of their children. This includes making sure their children are equipped to fulfill a productive role in society. Because they love their children and are concerned about their future welfare, parents, not the state, should be in charge of their children's education. In the biblical ideal, the family has tremendous influence on the future of society. This contrasts radically with our situation in the modern state, where bureaucrats who are thought to be experts control the educational system, and with it society's future. When families renege on their responsibilities toward their children, society suffers. No government program can redeem society from the corruption that results when the family

<sup>6</sup> American students are famous for neither spelling nor counting well.

collapses. Only the Church with the gospel of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can reform the family and bring it back to its proper biblical role.

Fifth, the family is the institution that creates wealth. This links the biblical view of the family with the modern science of economics. On the one hand, the biblical notion of the family as the creator of wealth fits capitalism far better than socialism. On the other hand, the individualism associated with modern capitalist thinking contrasts sharply with the biblical family ideal. Radical individualism is partly to blame for the picture of the “capitalist pig” maneuvering to satisfy his greed and selfish ambition. When the love of the family breaks down and men behave like tyrants in the home and animals outside of it, selfishness and greed rule the marketplace.

**The family is the first institution of social order.** But such individuals do not prevail in a Christian society, or even in a post-Christian society where the shadows of a Christian family ethic linger. The vast majority of fathers work self-sacrificially for their families. Fathers, motivated by love, work hard in order to earn money to buy goods that bring blessings to their families. The father and mother try to give their children advantages they did not enjoy in their day. By saving for the future and passing on an inheritance—not limited to material goods, by the way—the family increases the collective wealth of society over time. Whatever hinders the family in accumulating moral and economic capital—an overly heavy tax burden, laws restricting legitimate market activities, social welfare legislation, etc.—cripples the society as a whole.

Sixth, the family is the first institution of social order. Children learn to obey their parents and to respect authority in the home. Though modern men often neglect or deny this aspect of the family, it is so important that it was included in the Ten Commandments:

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. (Deut. 5:16)

Learning to submit to parents teaches children the self-control and respect they need to relate well to others. Self-denial for the benefit of others cannot really be taught through words or discipline—it comes only by example. When family life is characterized by self-denial and respect, the effects can



be seen in the society at large as charitable organizations and other forms of aid to the poor and needy flourish. As an outflowing of family love, charity is inherently different from welfare dispensed through a bureaucratic government institution.

Of course, discipline includes punishment for sin as well. The Bible teaches that, because of the deep sinfulness of man, all children need physical discipline administered in love. The repeated mention of the “rod” in the book of Proverbs indicates that corporal punishment in the Christian home must not reduce to mere violence (Prov. 10:13; 13:24; 14:3; 22:8, 15; 23:13–14; 26:3; 29:15).<sup>7</sup> Use of the rod means use on the hindquarters, a ceremonial application of physical punishment that presupposes an explanation of the reasons for the punishment (trial) and proportional discipline (“let the punishment fit the crime”). True discipline is chastisement, correction of a wayward child, not punishment in the sense of revenge. When a child, having grown up, refuses all correction, extreme measures may be called for. The ultimate forms of family discipline are disinheritance, in effect expelling a child from the family, and divorce, expelling a sinning husband or wife from the family. However, even in the case of the application of extreme measures, family discipline aims at and hopes for the restoration of the sinning party.

Discipline and order, in the end, come back to love. In fact, all of the family’s distinctive functions are expressions of love—procreation, education and training of children, providing for current and future needs and wants, charity, discipline, and passing on a legacy to future generations.

## The Church as a Covenantal Institution

As important as the family is for society, it is not the most fundamental institution. Though ordained by God as an institution of love, the family in the world after the Fall lacks both the wisdom and the spiritual energy to fulfill its God-created roles. Just as man in Adam is dead in trespasses and

<sup>7</sup>The rod is an instrument for the official application of punishment. Parents do not carry it around with them all the time and it requires preparation to use it. Thus, discipline cannot be a mere outburst of wrath and a fist. The time that it takes to find the rod and the nature of applying the rod—how many times, etc.—change the nature of the act of discipline from an explosion to a judicial punishment. Parents should explain to the child why he is being disciplined, how many times he will be spanked, and so forth.

sins, so too the family as an institution is dead in Adam and needs redemption. In the New Covenant, the Church has a special priority as the institution that administers God's Word and dispenses the sacraments of God's grace. Society depends upon the family, and the family depends upon the Church, for unless individuals are brought into a right relationship with Christ, families cannot be what they ought to be.

Just as the family is the institution that brings people into the world, the Church is the institution that brings people to God. Through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God in evangelistic endeavor, Bible classes, sermons, and informal conversation, the Church and her members spread the good news of Jesus' saving work so that men and women repent of their sins and turn unto God. Baptism is the covenant oath ceremony that officially brings one into a formal covenantal relationship with God. Of course, that does not mean that the thief on the cross or people in analogous situations cannot be saved. Normally, however, when a man professes faith, he solemnizes that profession by the covenant oath of baptism (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 36, 38; 16:31–34; 18:8; 22:16). With the taking of the solemn oath of baptism, one officially becomes a Christian.

To become a Christian means to become a member of Christ's body and bride, the Church. The Church in its fullness will not be complete until the end of history, when the whole number of God's elect has been gathered from the four corners of the earth. For now, believers all over the world come together in their local communities to worship and serve the Lord. In this respect, local churches are similar to

an extended family, being made up of sons of God and brothers in Christ—sons and brothers because we are all fellow heirs with

**Society depends upon the family, and the family depends upon the Church.**

Christ (Gal. 3:26–29). This extended covenantal family has obligations similar to those of the institutional family. Indeed, in Christ, the church may be said to be the new family, the eternal family of God. Earthly families die because of the curse in Adam, but the new family is eternal. Like the earthly family, the new family must submit to Christ to fulfill its historical mission.

The family as an institution of love depends on the Church as the institution that declares God's love and forgiveness to sinners. In baptism, God bestows His covenant grace and love upon the baptized person. Baptism is first of all His oath and promise. The teaching of God's Word instructs the



whole family of God in the way of God's commandments—the way of love. The gospel message declares that God so loved the world that He sent His Son to save it. Through the faithful teaching of the Word, the love of God is poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). This gives us the confidence to cry, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).

The local church resembles the family in structure also. The Bible refers to church leaders as elders, bishops, and pastors. These three titles probably describe the same office, but from different perspectives. There is another office, that of deacon, that serves as pastoral assistant. Distinctions among elders and pastors, or pastors and bishops, are part of the traditions of various churches and are not important for our consideration here. What all churches agree upon, however, is that church leaders are "elder brothers" in the faith, whose responsibility it is to teach and counsel those who are younger, so that they may mature (Heb. 13:7, 17). Paul refers to himself as both a father and a mother to churches that he has founded, and both of these ideas are appropriate for pastors leading the family of God (I Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19; I Thes. 2:7, 11). This means that local church members are responsible to submit to the elders as they would to their parents, and that local church elders are responsible to sacrifice their lives for the younger brothers and sisters in Christ over which God has placed them.

Weekly worship in the Bible is covenant renewal, that is, it is a time when God's children come before their Father to renew their vows to Him and receive His blessing. In the Bible, weekly worship meant weekly communion (Acts 20:7), a ceremony in which God's representatives, the elders or leaders of the Church, presented to the congregation the covenantal signs of His infinite love, the bread and wine representing the body and blood of Christ. This is a great mystery. Christ is present by the Holy Spirit, drawing near to us to bless us. Paul warned that the Lord's Supper may also bring a curse to those who come with an unrepentant heart, but the intention of the Supper is to remind God of His covenant so that He will bless us, and to remind us of the Gift of the covenant—our Savior Himself, whose covenantal presence we experience in the bread and wine (I Cor. 11:23–32).

The church is also an educational institution. Here again, unless the Church fulfills her duty and teaches the Word of God, the family will be unable to teach the children or train them properly in Christ. Fathers are commanded to nurture their children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4), but fathers

cannot begin to do this if no one instructs them. Jesus commanded the disciples, and thereby the Church, to teach Christians to do all things that He commanded (Mt. 28:20). Moral instruction aimed at intelligent obedience is therefore one of the Church's most basic duties, as important as administering the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Church as an educational institution has an important role not only in the educating children but also in training leaders in every sector of society. Politicians, doctors, lawyers, journalists, businessmen, and workers in all sectors of society need instruction in the Word of God so that they can fulfill their social role as Christians in obedience to Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

The Church's interest in education is as broad as the knowledge found in Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). Knowledge related to worship has priority, so the study of Scripture, including biblical languages, ancient history, church history, exegesis, theology, and everything related to these studies is essential to the life of every local church if Christians are to grow in understanding, obedience,

**It is time for the Church to reassert her right to truth.**

and love. Music and the arts have always found special expression in worship services and church architecture. The relationship between church history and world history is a matter of great theological concern as well. The Bible lays down moral instruction about money, diligence in labor, honesty, concern for the poor, thriftiness, and many other topics related to the ethical aspects of economics. Indeed, if Ludwig von Mises' ponderous tome on economic theory, *Human Action*,<sup>8</sup> is rightly titled, ethical concerns are the very heart of economic theory. What we have said about economics is equally true of political issues, the most significant of which are ethical: abortion, laws concerning marriage, and the definition of

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1966). This is not to say that von Mises himself viewed economics as fundamentally an ethical discipline. On the contrary, he specifically repudiated any sort of Christian ethical norms as important for a capitalist society (pp. 724–730), thereby undermining the moral foundations necessary for the protection of private property. Monogamy, for example, cannot be neglected in law without disastrous consequences for the family and the economy. Honesty, diligence, a future orientation, care for the poor, and other aspects of Christian ethics constitute the moral fiber of a truly productive society. That a brilliant economic thinker like von Mises argues against the importance of Christian virtue for society reveals the bankruptcy of secular capitalistic theory.



acceptable public behavior, to name just a few. Medicine has always been a special concern of the Church, since the aim of the medical profession is to save lives. In the past, the medical profession has always been related to the Church's work of charity. Modern ethical concerns call for the Church to think through difficult issues and offer real answers.

In the history of the West, virtually all intellectual life developed from the Church and her influence. That is the way it is supposed to be. However, with the intellectual victory of the anti-Christian viewpoints of the Enlightenment, the Church's role in academic affairs has been radically curtailed. It is now widely assumed that those loyal to Christ's Church suffer from an anti-intellectual bias that undermines their scholarly endeavors. But if Christianity is true and Christ is Creator and Lord of all, faithfulness to Christ is surely the key to understanding truth in any realm. It is time for the Church to reassert her right to truth, her claim on the world over which Christ rules, and her privileged position as the bride of Christ. She holds the keys to the kingdom. The university ought to be her servant. Theology, the erstwhile "queen of the sciences," should rule once again.

One area in which the Church differs from the family is in the economic role. The Church is not an economic producer and was never intended to be one. She lives by the tax that God has imposed upon His people. The biblical tithe is ten percent of one's income (Gen. 14:20; 28:22; Deut. 14:22; Heb. 7:2, 4). With ten families paying ten percent of their income, a local church can support a pastor at the level of the average income of his congregation. With twenty families, a local church can buy a building, engage in charitable activities, and contribute to various kinds of Christian ministries. With forty or more families, a local church can begin to sponsor its own ministries. When local churches band together to help one another in their labors, their ability to bear fruit increases exponentially. Thus, though financial support is essential, the Church is a non-profit organization, pursuing the kingdom of God with the funds God provides.

The Church shares with the family a concern for social order. In the New Testament, apostles rebuked the churches for their sins and charged the elders of the churches to carry on the task of rebuking and instructing in righteousness (2 Tim. 4:1–2). When the admonition of the local church is ignored or defied, the church must judge those who refuse to repent (Mt. 18:15–20). The Church has no right or responsibility to engage in physical

or economic punishment. She cannot exact fines or beat unrepentant sinners. What she can do is refuse the Lord's Supper to those who will not repent of their sins. It bears repeating that the sin that brings the Church's punishment is the sin of refusing to repent. Christians are not disciplined for being sinners, but for being unrepentant sinners. Christ Himself, in awesome words, ordained the authority of the local church in this respect:

But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. (Mt. 18:17–20)

This does not mean that God will endorse the folly of a sinful church. It does mean, however, that wicked men who despise the authority of the local church and think nothing of the warnings of her leaders, will someday find how greatly mistaken they were when the Great Judge repeats the sentence of His humble ambassadors.

## The State as a Covenantal Institution

God also ordained the institution of civil government (Rom. 13:1–6). Government has important responsibilities before God in maintaining social order and, to carry out these responsibilities, it alone has been committed the right of legal violence. A rightly functioning civil government would protect the churches from their enemies, punish evildoers, and protect and encourage those who do good works (Rom. 13:3–4). Because of its great power and responsibilities, civil government may seem to be the greatest of the three fundamental social institutions, but in fact, it is the most limited. Families and churches contribute far more to the positive life of society, even in the modern world where the state has usurped authority and rights beyond its legitimate bounds. Nevertheless, the negative incentive of the civil authority offers essential protection for the positive work of churches and families. It may take hundreds or thousands of good men to build a tower, but only a few evil men with determination to destroy it. Because the



destructive power of a small number of evil men in a society is so great, and the presence of evil men in a world of sin is so certain, the work of civil government as guardian of social order deserves honor and respect.

The Bible does not offer a particular form of civil government as ideal for all men at all times. Nor did Paul and the apostles engage in direct political action to reform the Roman Empire and its political structures. To conclude, however, that the New Testament message had no political implications would be gross error. Paul called Jesus *kurios*, Lord, the same title that Caesar also claimed. More than that, Paul referred to Jesus as the “Lord of glory” (I Cor. 2:8), and John declared Him “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 17:14; 19:16). Paul’s instruction about the family in the Book of Ephesians indirectly accused the royal family of Rome no less clearly than John the Baptist’s more direct words of rebuke indicted Herod and his family (Mk. 6:17–18). The claims of Christ and the ethical instruction of the New Testament collide with all that Rome stood for. Intelligent Romans would have understood that the gospel of Christ challenged the whole Roman way of life, including the political structures of Rome (Acts 17:6–8).

The government of the local church does provide a partial model for civil government. Church membership and the privilege of participating in the choice of leaders are ideas carried over from the political structures and social institutions of ancient Israel. But the Church was never what we would call a democracy, if by that term we mean ultimate authority is in the hands of “the people.” The Church is a constitutional monarchy—Christ is King; His Word is law. But the church also has representative leaders, called pastors, elders, bishops, and deacons. These men are subject to the discipline of the Church no less than any of the other members. The authority of Christ and His Law-Word, in other words, is above that of all human representatives.

Civil government of various types can incorporate these principles and function in a manner that honors God. The faith of the leaders and the acknowledgement of the ultimate authority of Christ are far more important than the basic structure of authority, be it monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, or any other form of government. In most of Western history, it has been common to publicly declare allegiance to Christ, and just as common to betray Him. In our day, we are less hypocritical in that we no longer claim

Him as our King, but more perverse in that our rebellion against Him is shameless.

Old Testament civil laws do not offer a specific blueprint for a Christian society. What they do offer is instruction in wisdom for Christian leaders. What God commanded ancient Israel remains an important part of Scripture, making us wise unto salvation and equipping us for good works (2 Tim. 3:15–17). What God defined as crime in the Law of Moses and the punishments He pronounced against those crimes should inform our thinking today, though the change from the Old to the New Covenant brought

**Christians have the responsibility to build civil governments and institutions that reflect a commitment to Christ.**

with it changes influencing our understanding and application of various laws as well. Everyone agrees that a simplistic application of Old Testament law would be highly inappropriate, but

Christians seem to have gone to the opposite, and just as inappropriate, extreme of neglecting it entirely. Given the lack of serious work in this area by Christian theologians, lawyers, and statesmen, we are a long way from being able to offer a mature, Christian theory of civil constitution and law. It is clear, however, that Christians have the responsibility to work on building civil governments and institutions that reflect Christian commitment to Christ and the ethical standards of His Word.

For most nations in the world today, the pressing need is to plant churches and train families to follow God. It is not until the vast majority of the families in a nation have been baptized and taught to obey Christ that the political life of the country can be changed sufficiently for godly government to thrive. The ancient kingdom of Judah experienced brief revivals when it had exceptionally good kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, but since their reforms did not really reach the majority of the populace, they did not last. In other words, with no spiritual transformation of synagogues and families, the effects of political change were short-lived and superficial. The same is true today. No long-lasting, positive change can be brought about in a country where local churches cannot or do not preach and teach the whole counsel of God.



## Conclusion

The Church has been called by Christ to build His kingdom, and He has guaranteed our historical success in the project. This is not merely a matter of preaching to people and leading them one by one to salvation. God is a society. He saves families and reconstitutes them as the core of new Christian societies, eventually building them into a new kingdom. Every nation should confess Christ as Savior and Lord, submitting to baptism and cheerfully obeying His commands (Mt. 28:18–20). Jesus Himself promised that He would lead the Church in her spiritual warfare: “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mt. 16:18). The picture here is one of gates not being able to withstand assault. Christ’s armies attack the very dominion of evil, as the Apostle John saw in a vision (Rev. 19:11–16).

Covenantal institutions and covenantal ceremonies play an important role in the building of God’s kingdom, because the triune God is a covenantal God who reveals Himself as He works in the world through His covenant. The three Persons of the Trinity, one in being, relate in covenantal love. Therefore, God ordained covenantal institutions for human society to reflect the love of the triune God and to spread His kingdom on earth.

In this age of individualism, the Church hardly stands as an effective institution, but we cannot entirely fault the secular world around us. Churches have too often neglected their own responsibilities, failing to employ the God-ordained means for building the kingdom. Such churches will be set aside for those that honor God by following His Word, for each local church ought to function as a miniature replica and representative of the whole body of Christ. Local churches, through baptizing, teaching the Word of God, and worshipping Him in spirit and truth, bring renewal to the family and society and help spread God’s kingdom throughout the world. Unless we are committed to social renewal through humble faith, sincere worship, and earnest service, we have missed the true gospel that declares God’s love for the world and His commission to disciple every nation.

## Review Questions

1. What are the basic questions to consider when comparing worldview approaches to society?
2. Compare and contrast various non-Christian views of society and ultimate reality.
3. Compare and contrast other aspects of non-Christian views of society.
4. Describe the individualism that tends to characterize the modern West.
5. What is a Christian view of the individual?
6. Explain the meaning of the expressions “in Adam” and “in Christ.”
7. How are baptism and the marriage oath important from a trinitarian perspective on mankind?
8. Explain the meaning of the family as a covenantal institution.
9. Describe the Church as a covenantal institution and explain its social significance.
10. Outline the basics of the biblical view of civil government.



## 10. Trinity and Eternity

THE DOCTRINES of heaven and hell are most awesome and unfathomable. Every doctrine in the Bible involves mystery. The doctrine of God, for example, confronts us with transcendent reality infinitely beyond our comprehension, and the doctrine of the incarnation teaches us the unfathomable miracle of God become man. The doctrines of heaven and hell, however, confront us with an especially inscrutable and wonderful revelation: the incomprehensible truth that man lives forever—either with God or without Him. Because we are God's image, we share God's attribute of eternity; therefore, at physical death, our souls do not simply evaporate into thin air and cease to be. Like all of created reality, our existence depends upon God, because we possess no principle or power of everlastingness within us. But God does not annihilate anyone. All live to testify to His glory, whether we are in heaven or in hell. Also, it is not just the duration of our eternal abode that we find daunting. The bliss of heaven is far beyond our imagination, and the horror of hell too terrible to contemplate. Both quantity and quality overwhelm us: eternal life or everlasting death. Every man has his final abode in heaven with God or in the place prepared for the devil and his angels.

### Trinity and Hell

Hell is an unfashionable idea in our day. Even many professing Christians deny the reality of hell. Non-Christians frequently cite the doctrine of hell

as a major reason for rejecting the Christian faith. If it could be erased from the list of important doctrines or somehow tamed so that it could be rendered palatable, everyone would be much happier. Its place in biblical revelation, however, remains so far beyond doubt that those who deny it defile their own conscience. Everyone who thinks about hell struggles with it, but if we submit our minds to the revelation of Scripture, if we trust that God is good and that His love and wisdom infinitely exceed ours, then we must believe His Word, trusting that what may appear strange to us now will someday be comprehensible.

### Is it Certain?

To begin with, is this “awful” doctrine really what the Bible teaches? The only honest answer is the affirmative. The biblical testimony about hell comes, remarkably, from the lips of Christ Himself more than from any other teacher. It was Jesus who spoke of the final judgment in these terms:

But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire. (Mt. 5:22)

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Mt. 10:28)

Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? (Mt. 23:33)

Cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt. 25:30)

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting 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 no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” (Mt. 25:41–43)

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life



with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell. (Mt. 18:8–9)

The description of hell as “everlasting” corresponds to the promise of life as “everlasting” in the teaching of Jesus. The very same Greek word is used to define the duration of both heaven and hell, so that the doctrine of eternal damnation and hell fire is taught with the same inescapable clarity as the doctrine of eternal life.

## What is Hell?

Hell is “dis-integration.” It is not *disintegration* in the sense of “dissolution.” The sinner in hell does not disappear in the fire of God’s wrath. Rather, his life falls apart. The sinner in hell reaps what he has sown, in terms of strict justice. In that sense, hell is different for every individual who experiences it.

First, he is separated from God. The man who rejects the gospel has rejected God Himself, and God honors his choice. The God-rejecter will live forever separated from God. This does not seem altogether unfair, but it always raises the question, What about those who have never heard, those who have never consciously rejected the gospel? The biblical answer found in Paul is that all men have heard, all men know the truth.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:18–20)

God has revealed Himself so fully to all—both internally (“evident within them”) and externally (“God made it evident to them . . . through what has been made”)—that there is no one to whom He has not shown Himself.<sup>1</sup> There is no one who has not had a chance. True, some have had more

<sup>1</sup> Children who die before birth or in infancy are usually considered an exception. They have not developed either self-consciousness or a consciousness of the other to the degree that they could receive revelation. The severely retarded, too, may be included in this category. Many Christians

opportunity than others; there are some to whom God has shown greater kindness. But this is true with respect to all things—to some God has given special talents and abilities, whether intellectual, spiritual, artistic, or physical. He does not distribute His gifts and blessings uniformly, as if on a conveyer belt. Every individual man and woman is unique. Some have more talent but less opportunity. Others have plenty of opportunity, but no desire or aptitude. His ways are mysterious. But the mystery does not reduce man's responsibility, nor does it detract from the stunning lucidity of God's self-revelation in the world He created.

So the man in hell may be said to have received what he has chosen for himself. He preferred in this life to live without God, and so he will in the next life also—for eternity. There is a difference, however, between his living without God in this life and his living without God in eternity. Sinful man is so dull and so skillful at self-deception that in this world he is able to avoid conscious knowledge of God. He can persuade himself that there is no God, and that when he dies he will disappear into nothingness. But after he dies and stands before God, he becomes like the demons.<sup>2</sup> His knowledge of God becomes so deeply ingrained by the direct experience of God's glory and majesty that, however much the sinner wishes to deny the reality of God, he can no longer escape. The beauty and majesty of God have been revealed to him in such overwhelming display that he will be tormented forever with the contradiction between his desire for God on the one hand and his hatred of Him on the other. Sinner though he is, he still bears God's image, and he is able to experience face-to-face the pure beauty of God's infinite love and splendor. At the same time, as a sinner, he feels the full brunt of God's wrath and righteous judgment. The essence of what it means to be a sinner is to be a hater of God: "the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God" (Rom. 8:7). So, forever and ever, he passionately hates what he loves most and loves what he hates most. He is tormented by the wonderful and terrible vision of God.

**Hell is "dis-integration"  
but not dissolution.**

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assume that all such persons are saved. Others, traditionally Roman Catholics, hold that only the baptized will be saved. I see no reason not to hope for the salvation of all such persons.

<sup>2</sup> "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" (Jas. 2:19)



Second, psychological disintegration has another dimension. According to the Bible, man is psychologically deep and complex—a testimony to which modern psychology concurs in its use of ideas like the “unconscious.” We do not know ourselves. Evil thoughts and motives occur even to “normal” people. We imagine sinful deeds. Usually thoughts of this sort can be overcome and we do not act on them, but a question remains: Do these perverse thoughts represent the real inner man, or is the self that snuffs out the flame of iniquity the true self? According to the Bible, the man who does not believe in Christ is prevented from fulfilling the lusts of his heart by God’s grace, so that he cannot be his worst self. Of course, this restraining grace has multiple aspects, for God may work directly or use indirect means such as social pressure, family training, education, and so on. But unless the Spirit of God restrained the outbreak of sin, there would be nothing to stem the evil thoughts and intentions of sinning man from welling up into evil action of all kinds. His worst self is his true self.

Serial killers illustrate this aspect of the development of sin. According to the description by FBI profiler Robert K. Ressler, serial killers are men who cannot restrain their imaginations.<sup>3</sup> What they envision in their minds over and over, with terrifying vividness, they feel constrained to act out. Since they are not able to put out the flame in their hearts, it grows until they are consumed by it. Even these men do not develop into their worst possible selves, but they illustrate a kind of psychological breakdown that gives us some idea of the horror of hell. Imagine a man who cannot control his evil imaginings, a man whose everyday life is dominated by his darkest nightmares. He hates himself for what he is and what he does, but he cannot free himself from himself. It is worse than addiction; it is his true, innermost nature.

Man in hell cannot control his thoughts and motives. He is caught in the iron trap of his sinful self because that is all that is left of him. God no longer restrains his sin, upholding the nobler aspects of his character as God’s image. At the same time, the man cannot satisfy his lusts either. He is confined to a world in which lust rages without limit and without satisfaction. The more he lusts, the greater his frustration—the greater his frustration, the more the fires of lust burn.

<sup>3</sup> Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shachman, *Whoever Fights Monsters: My Twenty Years Tracking Serial Killers for the FBI* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), e.g. 13–14, 19–20, 80–81, 95–100, 130–131.

Thus, hell is dis-integration in the sense that the sinner contradicts his own self. The horror of hell is the horror of the man who looks into the mirror of his soul and sees all the monsters, all the fearsome and foul fiends he so loathes and abominates. The fire of hell is the fire of a conscience that can no longer escape the penetrating self-accusation, the clear and complete knowledge of one's utter perversity—all the excuses gone, every form of self-justification and self-deception stripped away, so that nothing is left but the most unpleasant, unendurable, unbearable truth. The psychology of hell is the psychology of a man whose greatest torture is to become what he truly is and know it with infallible certainty.

Third, dis-integration means that man is no longer capable of community with other men. Hell is a place where men are alone by self-contradictory choice. Again, on the one hand, all men long desperately for community. We thirst for fellowship with other men. But other men are God's image. After the sinner has faced the heavenly Judge and understood who and what he and other men are, fellowship outside of God is impossible. Men in hell are alone not so much because God locks them away in solitary confinement, but because they choose to be alone rather than look upon the image of the Holy One still reflected in the faces of the other lost and tormented souls who have their part in hell.

The Bible indicates that each man is rewarded according to his works (Rev. 20:12–13). This means, as we pointed out, hell will be different for each person. The psychology of hell indicated above suggests at least one dimension of this difference. The more openly a man has rejected the true God, the more deeply his own conscience will torture him for the wicked choice he made. He will chide himself forever for his folly while never really escaping it. The self-accusation, the visceral hatred of God and other men, and the psychological disintegration all continue and progressively worsen forever.

## Hell in History

We have all known aspects of hell in our own lives because we are all sinners and have experienced the self-contradiction, vanity, folly, and self-destructiveness of sin. We also know the alienation of sin, to some small degree. We have experienced the terror of seeing things in ourselves that we cannot bear



to acknowledge, except to reject completely. In these experiences, we have tasted something of a bitter morsel of hell, enough to know that the full, foul taste and stench of the real hell would overpower and devastate us.

#### *For the Individual*

As individuals, we know something of the psychological disintegration of hell because we have experienced the discomfiting fact of our own self-contradiction. We have said or done things that we regret, that we can hardly believe we have done and that we wish we could undo. In repentance, we confess and reject these thoughts, words, and deeds (1 Jn. 1:8–10). The fact that we daily repent in our prayers and weekly repent in our worship indicates the depth of our self-contradiction and the powerful hold it has on our lives.

We also have the experience of evil thoughts and imaginings that horrify us. As we pointed out above, the Bible teaches that God restrains sinners so that they do not fulfill every wicked desire or thought, but what if all restraint were removed? What if the worst thoughts and motives flooded our hearts and minds so that nothing could prevent them from overflowing into evil deeds?

#### *For the Society*

We also have experienced something of the sociology of hell. We all know what it means to be unable to communicate with those we love the most, when our words and meaning simply fail to get through. We feel alone, misunderstood, even betrayed. We suffer from the loss of community and understanding that results from our sinfulness and the sinfulness of our family and friends. In hell, this loss is unreserved, experienced to the fullest. Instead of occasional and partial communication breakdown, it is total and unrelieved. The God-hater is completely and utterly alone. Hell's aloneness is not simply imposed upon him, however. He chooses it because the alternative of facing others is even worse.

So-called "primitive" societies can illustrate the breakdown of society, even though sociologists often cite them as examples of societal cooperation and selflessness. It is commonly the case that envy so strongly rules the society that no individual dares to stand out or to succeed. If one does better than others in the hunt, for example, he must share his goods, not out of love or a desire to share, but because it would be dangerous to claim the

rewards of his own work. From the biblical perspective, societies like the African Ik tribe illustrate extreme social breakdown.<sup>4</sup> Social norms and customs including normal family love, cooperation, care for the weak and elderly, and even funeral rites, are nonexistent. A less extreme but no less illustrative case comes from the record of a converted Yanomamo Indian shaman from South America, who has written of the social horrors of pagan life.<sup>5</sup> A society where there is no material or spiritual progress and growth is a degenerate and dying society, one that is already experiencing the beginnings of eternal vanity and decay.

## Resurrection unto Judgment

The Bible teaches that all men will be resurrected from the dead, not just the righteous.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (Jn. 5:28–29)

Those who have rejected the grace of God proffered in a thousand ways will be raised from the dead to be judged in their bodies for the deeds done in the body. Even in the doctrine of judgment, the permanent meaning and essential goodness of the material order is affirmed. The body itself is not the source of evil; rather, the body is so essential to the identity of man that to be judged for his life on earth requires bodily resurrection so that the whole man can stand before God.

## The Trinitarian Meaning of Hell

Hell is the rejection of God and therefore the opposite of everything God is. Within the Trinity, each Person is wholly self-realized because each Person is

<sup>4</sup> Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972). Turnbull's perspective is not Christian, and some aspects of his research have been challenged, but his work still serves to illustrate the extreme social breakdown of a non-Christian society.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Andrew Ritchie, *Spirit of the Rainforest: A Yanomamo Shaman's Story* (Chicago: Island Lake Press, 1996).



wholly loved and fulfilled in the others. God is also a society in which each Person is fully integrated with the others. To reject God, then, is to reject the ultimate society. Thus hell means psychological and social dis-integration: the ruin of man's heart and the destruction of all his relationships.

We see the nature of hell in the rejection of the triune God, but the question remains: Why should God so hate those who reject Him that His anger burns forever? Part of the answer is found in the story of Jesus. When God appeared among men as one of us, weak and subject to the infirmities of the flesh, needing food and rest, the response of sinful mankind was to hate Him for His righteousness. This was not the peculiar sin of the Jews. If anything, Israel was better prepared to receive Him and less God-hating than any other people or nation. But when the Messiah came, every kind word He spoke and every noble act He performed inflamed and aggravated the Jews' intolerance and provoked their murderous hatred until they could only scream, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Sinful man's opposition to God, usually dormant and disguised even from the sinner himself, was roused by the sight of God and could not rest until the lust for deicide had been fulfilled. This is not the story of one people long ago in a small country on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. It is the story of Adam and his seed, the story of all mankind's rejection of God.

How does God respond? The Father rages with jealous love against those who hate His Son. The Son's righteous fury burns against those who would defile, defame, and disparage the Holy Spirit. Each of the Persons of the Trinity is jealous for the honor, glory, and praise of the others. When the Bible declares that God is a jealous God, it means first and foremost that each Person of the Trinity guards the glory of the others with omnipotent, holy zeal. The wrath of God against hell-bound sinners is not primarily against their specific deeds, but against their passionate and deep-seated hatred of the truth. Once sinners have seen God face-to-face, they know He is the one they hunger to destroy. The sight of God burns away all pretense and hypocrisy. What is left is the monster's heart. Jekyll has laid aside restraint for the last time and plunged into the depths of Hyde's pure, God-rejecting shame and evil. And God hates him in return.

**Christ's jealous love for the Church prevents the fullest expression of sin.**

The confinement of sinful men to the punishment they have chosen for

themselves is the negative expression of the positive love that each Person of the Trinity has for the others and that God has for His Church, Christ's bride. For the sons of Cain hate the sons of Abel even more after death. If Cain could, he would murder Abel daily forever and ever. If Saul had another chance to pin David to the wall with his spear, he would do it not once, but again and again for all eternity. Christ's jealous love for the Church prevents the fullest expression of sin by confining the wicked where they can do no harm.

We should not think of hell merely in terms of offended justice, as if God sits and dispenses impartial judgment on the damned. Quite the contrary. God is the principal victim as well as the prosecutor and judge. He vehemently presses His complaint. He prosecutes the case with ardor. He judges in righteous indignation. God is a jealous God whose love has been betrayed. There is no room in the biblical doctrine of final judgment for a passionless application of law by blindfolded justice. God sees, feels, and acts with the full passion of His infinite Person.

## Trinity and Heaven

### Heaven and History

As sinners, we have all experienced something of the horrors of hell in our everyday lives. On a much happier note, it is also true that virtually all men, as creatures in God's image, have experienced something of the bliss of heaven as well. The warm smile of a friend or family member, the tender embrace of love, the joy of simple play, the stimulation of good conversation, the physical exhilaration of running as fast or jumping as high or as far as one can, the pleasure of a sumptuous feast—all of these experiences of fellowship and joy in this life are foretastes of the bliss of heaven. The Christian heaven is not like the popular image of a place where winged angels float on clouds and play their harps all day, every day, singing spooky chants forever and ever. We will live in heaven in our resurrected bodies and enjoy many of the same things that were so good, lovely, pure, and holy in this life. Many of the good things of this life, however, will not continue into the next because they belong to the world of the first covenant, or to



the fallen state. For example, the courage of a man who sacrifices his life to save family or friends, or even total strangers, is one of the most beautiful and honorable deeds we can witness in this world, but in the world to come courage of this sort will no longer be needed.

## Creation and Heaven

The fact that Christianity teaches physical resurrection is profoundly significant. It confirms, of course, what we said earlier about the goodness of the physical creation, but even more, it points to the connection between this present life and the future one in heaven. Contrary to the thinking of even some Christians, the two are not separate realities. Heaven is not Plan B, initiated to make up for Plan A that fell apart in Eden. Nor is heaven a radical leap to a different and unrelated dimension, as if we have left behind this universe to move into a new and unrelated reality. Heaven is, rather, the fulfillment of everything this world was intended to be.

In the Bible, the first creation was never intended to be the end. This is not to say the first creation should be viewed as flawed or necessarily infected with evil. Evil came into the world because angels and men chose to rebel against God. Even without the rebellion, however, the first world would not have been the final one. The original creation was a training ground for heaven. It was an immature world, a phase leading to something higher and more wonderful, a stage of development through which man must pass in order to attain the higher and more wonderful world God intended for him.

**The fact that Christianity teaches physical resurrection is profoundly significant.**

God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. He changed the original, inchoate creation, described in Genesis 1:2 as being formless, empty, and dark, into a fully formed world of light and beauty and created things. But the world was still not "finished." God created man as His image to complete the project. Like God did at the beginning, man too was to work six days and rest one, adding more light, augmenting the delightful form of the world, and filling it with more people and things so that God's mandate would be fulfilled. When man's work is finally done, the whole world will be transformed into a garden city and the purpose of history will be completed. But this will not be the end of history. On the contrary,

history itself will be glorified. Like man's glorified resurrection body, the glorified world we now call heaven will be, in fact, the same world that God and man built together through the process of time transformed into the glorious and timeless kingdom of God.

### *Progress and Heaven*

The Christian doctrine of heaven, therefore, is directly related to the Christian doctrine of world history. In the Christian view, heaven is the climax of history—a view unique to world religions. It represents one of the most remarkable cultural aspects of the Christian religion: the idea of progress over time toward a glorious conclusion. This idea, taken for granted for so long in the West but now beginning to be challenged, is a rare notion both culturally and religiously.

J. B. Bury, who wrote the most famous inquiry into the idea of progress, suggested that it was the product of the Enlightenment and denied it altogether for the world of antiquity or the Christian Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Beard summarizes him as follows:

With a few exceptions ancient writers were imprisoned in a vicious circle: they thought that mankind revolved in a cycle through some series of stages. In the Middle Ages thought and practice were cramped by the belief that man was a sinful creature born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, that the world would come to a close sometime, and that life on earth was not an end in itself but a kind of prelude to heaven or hell. It was not until commerce, invention, and natural science emancipated humanity from thralldom to the cycle and to the Christian epic that it became possible to think of an immense future for moral mankind, of the conquest of the material world in human interest, of providing the conditions for a good life on this planet without reference to any possible hereafter.<sup>7</sup>

But Bury was wrong. That there was simply no notion of progress in ancient Greece or Rome, or that the idea of progress came out of the Enlightenment, is just not true. Although the idea was not dominant in antiquity, Robert Nisbet has shown that some of the major thinkers in classical Greece

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth*, with an introduction by Charles A. Beard (New York: Dover Publications, 1955 [1932]).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.



and Rome thought in terms of the progress of civilization, at least in the sense that they apparently saw knowledge accumulated over time lead to progress in society.<sup>8</sup> There does not, however, appear to have been a governing faith in the inevitability of progress, nor was the idea so deeply imbedded in the culture that one could speak of classical society presupposing a “law of progress.” With regard to classical antiquity, then, Bury overstated his case, but there is some truth in the assertion that there was no overall doctrine of progress.

Bury was correct that Enlightenment thinkers like Auguste Comte believed in the inevitability of progress, but they were certainly not the first to hold such an idea, nor did the idea have real impact in their worldview. As Enlightenment secularism and rationalism developed from deism to evolution, the notion of teleology in the universe was set aside. Progress, though widely assumed in the nineteenth century, gradually gave way to blind chance

**The Bible is the origin of the fullest notion of progress.**

in the twentieth. Two world wars pulverized the Enlightenment hope for an ideal future based upon the Enlightenment worldview. As people thought more about the theory of evolution, they

realized that evolution cannot guarantee “progress,” only change, and furthermore that the whole notion of progress is indefinable from an evolutionary perspective. In the world of evolution, the human race has no special status, nor is there any certainty that mankind and human culture will advance and “evolve” to a higher state. Thousands of species of animals have disappeared from the earth. If the dinosaurs can become extinct, why not man?

From Bury’s perspective, progress must be an idea ingrained in man’s psychical and social nature.<sup>9</sup> It must, in other words, be grounded in man, not God. Bury opposes it to the idea of Providence. The theory of evolution is important to the secularist because it enables him to erase God from the picture of the world, but in so doing, he also expunges any basis for viewing man as having special meaning or dignity. Bury’s “idea of progress,” not rooted in Providence, died for lack of historical nutrition during a bloody century of war, totalitarianism, and barbaric inhumanity perpetrated by the most advanced cultures of Europe and the Far East.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 10–46.

<sup>9</sup> Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 5.

With regard to the Christian Middle Ages and ancient Hebrew religion, Bury is entirely mistaken. The Bible is the origin of the fullest notion of progress and the only view of the inevitability of progress that would not reduce it to a mere impersonal law. In the Bible, progress is a “law of creation” in the sense that we learn from the beginning that God created the world with a purpose and that nothing man or demons can do will thwart the perfect will of God. This is historical inevitability, grounded in an eternal personal plan and purpose and guaranteed by omnipotence.

In Genesis, we see that when God created Adam and Eve, He gave them and their descendants a commission: “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). The Garden of Eden itself was a model for Adam and Eve, giving them a picture of the world they and their descendants should build. When we turn to the Book of Revelation and the biblical conclusion of history, we see the Edenic commission fulfilled. The garden has become a city, the New Jerusalem. The gold and jewels of the Garden have been mined and developed so that the heavenly city sparkles with glory. The one family in the Garden has been multiplied into countless multitudes who constitute one bride for the Son of God. There is no more night or darkness—originally symbols of immaturity, not evil—for the light of God’s glory fills the city with light forever.

Between Eden and the New Jerusalem, there is progress—covenantal progress, based upon God’s gracious work in and through man, His image. Because God is working in history to accomplish a purpose He Himself ordained, no sin of man or deception of devils can halt history’s forward march. In the most extreme case the Bible records, the whole world turned away from God so radically that He destroyed it with a flood. Even though all the cities had been destroyed and all mankind had been reduced to one family, God gave Noah and his descendants a covenant, sealed by the rainbow, that man would once again fill the earth and rule over it. We see, then, that progress is not necessarily in numbers, or in technology, or in institutions, or in culture. Real historical progress is the progress of God’s covenant.

Of course, progress is not always incremental and steady. Instead, what we see in Israel’s history are times of rapid growth and development, times



of apostasy and decline, and times of slow but gradual growth. Sometimes we see a combination of events. For example, a period of apostasy might include an undercurrent of slow and gradual growth that will in the end be historically far more significant. Also, tragically, a time of renewal and reformation, as in the reign of Josiah, may be merely superficial and only appear progressive, when in fact the social cancer of unbelief has spread so far that the body politic is dying from the inside out. In short, the history of Israel shows us that God's working in the world is not only mysterious and unpredictable but also able to progress with or without man's help. He blesses His people, punishes the wicked, and works through all sorts of men in the most incomprehensible ways to bring about the most unpredictably wonderful results.

The idea of heaven is not, therefore, a contradiction of the biblical and providential view of progress. The fact that history has a conclusion gives progress a goal. The fact that Christ died and rose again to sit at the right hand of God, where He will remain until He has "put all enemies under His feet" (I Cor. 15:25), guarantees that the goal will be reached because in Him it has already been accomplished. The kingdom of God is not realized through technology, science, or economic and political advances, though all these things are good and important. The most important thing is the preaching of the gospel of Christ, baptizing the nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all of Jesus' commandments. The work of the Church in the ministry of the Word is God's means for transforming the world into His kingdom, the passageway to the eternal city of God.

## The Biblical Picture of Heaven

The biblical picture of heaven comes to us in a vision. Actually, the Apostle John saw a series of visions, recorded in the last chapters of the book of Revelation (19–22). Unfortunately many Christians today tend to take these visions literally, as if they were previews of tomorrow's newscast on *CNN Live* rather than what they truly were—highly symbolic visions much like those of the Old Testament prophets. In the Book of Daniel there is a good example of an Old Testament vision expressed in symbolic language. Daniel saw a vision of beasts coming up out of the sea (Dan. 7). No commentator

or theologian has ever interpreted these visions literally. The beasts were symbols of pagan nations that rose up to dominate the world, providing shelter for the priestly people of God, Israel, until the coming of the Messiah. Daniel's vision came true literally, but it was expressed in the biblical language of symbol.

John's vision was also symbolic. We do not know exactly what heaven will look like, but we should not imagine that it will look entirely different from the world we live in now, for heaven is the glorification of the first creation, just like our resurrection bodies are the glorified form of our present bodies. We assume that the glory of our heavenly bodies means a transformation of our present bodies so that those with deformed members or scarred and mangled bodies will be made whole. The example of the resurrected body of Christ also shows us that we will be recognizable. In the same way, the new heavens and new earth will not be so different that we will have no idea where we are or what we are seeing, even though the transformation will be wonderful and beyond what we can now imagine.

John's vision is primarily a vision of complete and perfect fulfillment of all that God intended for man in the Garden of Eden, demonstrating that Satan's plan to undermine God's holy will for mankind did not succeed. Rather, God in His wisdom used even the most evil and perversely rebel-

**John's vision is primarily one of perfect fulfillment of all that God intended in Eden.**

lious men and demons to bring about the purpose that He intended, so that evil, too, contributes to the blessing of God's people and the glory of the eternal city. The darkness of Genesis 1:2 is overcome in a city of perpetual light (Rev. 21:23).

Formlessness gives way to a symmetrically measured city with twelve jewel-laden foundations, twelve gates of pearl, magnificent jasper walls, and golden streets. The emptiness of the original world disappears in the fullness of the new, as innumerable multitudes of peoples worship and serve God in abundance of joy. There are no tears, no pain, no sorrow.

Essential to the picture of heaven are the words "His servants shall serve Him" (Rev. 22:3). Heaven is not an eternal vacation, a place where redeemed humanity does nothing. We do not know what mankind will be doing in the ages of eternity, but because God is a God who always works (Jn. 5:17), we know that man, as His image, will also work. Our labor, however, will have none of the pain, failure, or disappointment that we



experience now because of the curse. Times of work and rest, no doubt, will characterize the eternal calendar, but work itself will be a rest of sorts, because we will enjoy our service to Christ. Each person will perform an important task for the kingdom, one that will also express his own individuality and talents to the fullest degree. Man will never be infinite, but he will always be growing and learning and accomplishing, as he works for the continued growth of the kingdom. The infinite depths of God's glory hide treasures to be mined and enjoyed forever.

## The Trinitarian Meaning of Heaven

Not until the revelation of God in Jesus Christ could man truly know the triune God and understand the full meaning of divine personhood and relationship. Only when we know God as a Trinity do we know the meaning of man's covenantal psychology and sociology. In the Trinity, therefore, we know the blessedness of man's future state, for heaven is the full realization of what it means to be God's image. To be in the state of full blessedness is to be what God made us to be.

This is true in no other religion. Islam does not have for its promised blessing in heaven a vision of likeness to Allah. The martyr for the faith is promised forgiveness of sins, salvation in the day of final judgment, and seventy-two black-eyed *houris*—female beings created especially for man's pleasure.<sup>10</sup> He is not promised likeness to Allah. What could it mean for him to be like Allah? The good Muslim strives to be like Mohammed, and ironically that tells us precisely what conservative Muslims look for in heaven—the kind of sensuous pleasure that only a man of Mohammed's stature could enjoy. Nor does Judaism have a vision of God-likeness. In fact, it is often claimed that Judaism has no doctrine of heaven and hell at all. Buddhism has contradictory views on the subject, since reincarnation precludes either heaven or hell. Buddhists view salvation as escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, but nirvana is hardly a state we would call heaven. Of course, with no god in Buddhism, there is no new humanity in his likeness.

<sup>10</sup> Sheik Isma'il Aal Radhwan, excerpts from "A Friday Sermon," The Sheik 'Ijlin Mosque, Gaza, August 17, 2001, at <http://www.memri.org/video/>.

## Individual Realization

Each of the three Persons of the Trinity is wholly free, wholly Himself, and wholly free to express Himself. So, too, every person who enters heaven will be granted full freedom, individuality, and self-expression. Because we are made in the image of the triune God, we look to Him to understand ourselves. To refer to the Persons as “individuals” would not be appropriate, but there are three in God who refer to themselves as “I.” The three Persons of the Trinity are one God, one being, and therefore share their attributes in a unity that transcends the unity of the new humanity in Christ. But each of the Persons of the Trinity is unique, and each one preserves and upholds the uniqueness of the others. Thus, the Son is free to be Himself and to express all that is proper to His being because the Father and the Spirit jealously guard the Son’s glory and Person. This perfect freedom of self-expression and individuality in God reveals the perfect freedom given to the resurrected believer in heaven.

The individual man in heaven, redeemed by the grace of God, differs from other men in ways similar to our differences here. Though we must assume the glorified state includes an exaltation of all our powers and abilities, there is no reason to assume that differences among men will be erased. We will not all have the same talents or inclinations. We will not all do the same work for God. Each man will be free to be himself and to express himself fully. There will be no sin or selfishness, no vain pretence to divine prerogatives that will mar his self-expression and pervert the meaning of his individuality. Personalities will be different, too. The defects that spoil our personalities now—the lust for attention that often characterizes the gregarious person, for example, or the self-concerned fear that often characterizes the shy and quiet type—will be removed, but the fact of individual differences will not be eliminated. If anything, the differences will be more pronounced, for nothing will be hindered by sin. An infinite variety of men and women, each living fully and freely as he or she wishes, is one aspect of what it means that man, as the image of the triune God, will be blessed.

## Social Fulfillment

Man is no less a society than an individual. Individual fulfillment apart from a perfect society, therefore, is inconceivable. This is obviously and in-



disputably true. What would individual fulfillment mean if one were absolutely alone? Why this is true is another question. The only answer that can really satisfy man's intellectual and spiritual quest is the triune God, the One who is Three, in whose image we are made.

In heaven the new human society in Christ, the family of God, will be a society in which all work together in a unity of love and purpose. No one advances through detracting from another. Competition for goods or favor disappears in the absolute abundance of all that is needed and the infinite openness of God's favor to us. The fulfillment of the whole society is realized through the fulfillment of each individual. The book of Revelation implies that special blessings of corporate worship, fellowship, play, performance, and enjoyment will all have their set times and places, for it describes the eternal abode as a city with gates to which the nations of the world will bring their glory (Rev. 21:22–27).

When Revelation says, "His servants will serve Him," it obviously includes cooperative labor as well as the individual's special work. The new humanity will have its collective projects and celebrations to which each individual will contribute as members of a unified body. The whole society will live for the single ultimate purpose of glorifying God, while groups and individuals pursue various goals at all levels of importance. The social pleasures of leisure and recreation, competitive sports (without pain or humiliation), entertainment, conversation, and the relaxed enjoyment of the beauty of God's creation—in short, a sanctified social participation in virtually all of the good things we enjoy now—are part of the vision of future glory. In addition, we must anticipate the addition of immeasurably more good gifts of God, for Paul speaks of the "manifold wisdom of God" and the "riches of His glory" being manifested through His purposes in the Church (Eph. 3:10, 16). Surely these words contain more than history can hold.

**Individual fulfillment apart from a perfect society is inconceivable.**

## Fellowship with God

The highest blessing of heaven is fellowship with God. Various expressions in the book of Revelation point to this central truth of heavenly blessedness. Together, they suggest that the Church will enjoy something of the

intimacy and fullness of the covenantal fellowship of the three Persons of the Trinity.

Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. (Rev. 21:3–4)

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. (21:7)

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. (21:22–23)

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (22:3–5)

All of these passages from John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem describe, in the language of a vision, what Jesus prayed for in John 17.

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:20–26)



Those in Christ are to be one as the Father and the Son are one. In other words, Christians will be granted a covenantal oneness like that of the three Persons of the Trinity. They will also share in the covenantal fellowship of the three Persons themselves, for the Church is in Christ as the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father. The Church is also one in both Father and Son. The Church indwelt by God is covenantally one with God and therefore covenantally one in herself.

We cannot begin to fathom all that it means to share such intimate fellowship with God, but we can be sure that if we have enjoyed anything true, or noble, or just, or pure, or beautiful, or praiseworthy, that God Himself is infinitely more than all of the good things we have known or imagined. The enjoyment of God includes the enjoyment of all the things He created and of every gift He gives. And so much more. Every biblical expression that points to the fullness of our salvation leads us to contemplate the greatness and wonder of God Himself. In order for us to enjoy and glorify Him as we should, Paul tells us that we will be made like Him.

**Christians will share in the covenantal fellowship of the three Persons.**

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom. 8:29)

## Conclusion

There is more to hell and heaven than we can even suggest, but from this brief study, it should be apparent that neither one is properly conceivable apart from the illumination provided by a trinitarian perspective. The hot lava of God's wrath against those who hate His Son bursts forth from the eternal fire of love between the Persons of the Trinity. How could a tripersonal God of love not be a God in whom each Person protects the honor of the other and opposes with an infinite energy all that would detract from that honor? At the same time, the blessedness of heaven as fellowship with God and the enjoyment of the good gifts He has given require the presupposition of the Trinity also. Man is not conceivable either as merely an individual or as merely a society. We can never fully realize the meaning of man or of the fullness of the

blessing of God apart from the most superlative development of the individual and society united in perfect harmony—that is, apart from the full realization of the covenantal love of the Trinity among men.

Nothing in this world or in the world to come can be properly known or appreciated apart from the triune God, whose love and grace sustain, govern, lead, and bring to fulfillment all His works.

Glory be to the Father  
And to the Son  
And to the Holy Ghost,  
As it was in the beginning,  
Is now and ever shall be,  
World without end.  
Amen!

## Review Questions

1. What are the biblical grounds for believing in everlasting punishment?
2. Outline the biblical view of hell.
3. Explain how hell invades human history.
4. What is the trinitarian meaning of hell?
5. Explain the relationship between creation and heaven.
6. How does the Enlightenment doctrine of progress relate to the biblical idea of history and heaven?
7. Why is it important to remember that John's picture of heaven came in a vision?
8. Explain how the Garden of Eden develops into the heavenly city.
9. What is the trinitarian significance of heaven for the individual and for society?
10. Explain what it means to say that heaven is the realization of covenantal fellowship with God.









# Further Reading

## Trinity

### Internet Sites

#### Trinitarianism.com

From the site introduction: “Trinitarianism.com is dedicated to promoting advanced knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity and its application to the Christian life. In addition to more scholarly essays and reviews, we will include devotional mediations on the doctrine of the Trinity also. All of our material has as its single purpose to encourage Christians to make the worship of the Triune God central to their thought and life.”

#### Biblicalhorizons.com

Biblical Horizons is the ministry of James Jordan. Many of his studies include discussions of the Trinity or are applications of the doctrine of the Trinity. Jordan is one of the most important theological thinkers of our day and he writes in an accessible style.

### Audio Materials

#### *The Triune Life* (Canon Press)

This tape cassette series addresses Christian ministers and is therefore somewhat advanced, but the lectures are easy to understand and follow. It is an excellent series for serious students of the Trinity.

*The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Institute of Theological Studies)

This is a seminary course in systematic theology. Peter Toon's lectures are easy to follow, and the course offers a full introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity in twenty-four lectures. It is available from <http://www.its.gospelnet.com>.

**Books**

Erickson, Millard J. *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995.

Millard Erickson is a well-known Baptist theologian. His positions are conservative and orthodox. His writing style is clear. This is a good introduction to a more advanced study of the Trinity, if for no other reason than that it introduces the important authors and issues.

Gunton, Colin. *The One the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993.

Colin Gunton was an important thinker who wrote a number of books on the doctrine of the Trinity. He is not an entirely reliable guide and his books have to be used with discernment, but for the advanced student, he offers a wealth of insight.

Smith, Ralph A. *Paradox and Truth*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 2003.

For a more advanced study of the doctrine of the Trinity focused especially on the trinitarian thought of Cornelius Van Til, this book may be helpful.

———. *The Eternal Covenant*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon, 2003.

This book offers a discussion of the relationship between the doctrines of the covenant and the Trinity in Reformed theology.

**Worldview****Internet Sites**

Berith.org

Berith.org is the internet site for the Covenant Worldview Institute in Tokyo, Japan. It deals with worldview-related issues of various sorts.

Credenda.org

A ministry of Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho which includes a wealth of material dealing with the practical application of the Christian worldview to daily life.



### Books

Jordan, James. *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical Worldview*. Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988).

Jordan's introduction to the Christian worldview stands out as the most biblical presentation of the whole subject of worldview. Starting with the creation and emphasizing the symbolic world established from the beginning, Jordan introduces the fundamental biblical symbolic system that underlies the tabernacle and temple system in the Old Testament and finds its fulfillment in the symbolic description of the New Jerusalem. No other book offers such a deep challenge for the Christian to reorient his thinking.

Leithart, Peter. *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon, Press, 2000.

This book expands on the Old Testament section of Jordan's *Through New Eyes*. It is one of the best introductions to the Old Testament available, giving the student a clear picture of the development of the kingdom of God in history.

———. *Heroes of the City of Man*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999.

Leithart offers a Christian analysis of the classical literature which created the worldview of the ancient Greek and Roman world. Understanding the Greek and Roman myths not only opens up the worldview of the classical era, it offers a backdrop for understanding Christianity and is indispensable for understanding much of the history of Western literature.

———. *Against Christianity*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003.

Leithart's most recent book is a worldview-level challenge to the modern evangelical church, calling it back to the Word of God.

———. *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993.

This is an important study for understanding the place of the Church in the plan and purpose of God.

Jones, Doug, and Doug Wilson. *Angels in the Architecture*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1998.

This might be called a study in comparative worldviews. By introducing the medieval worldview and comparing it with our modern views, Jones and Wilson offer insights into Christian thinking and a challenge for us to change our lives. In particular, the importance

of the aesthetic dimension of life in the medieval world contrasts sharply with the modern evangelical way of thought.

Hegeman, David Bruce. *Plowing in Hope: Toward a Biblical Theology of Culture*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1999.

A brief biblical and covenantal theology of culture, abounding with insights on subjects varying from Brussels sprouts to Picasso.



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THE TRINITY IS THE HEART of the Christian gospel, but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seldom occupies that position in contemporary discussions of the Christian worldview. This book helps fill the need by unveiling the Trinity at the center of reality.

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