FAITH WITH *Understanding*

Revised Edition

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The Joint Board of Christian Education
Melbourne

Published by
THE JOINT BOARD OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
65 Oxford Street, Collingwood 3066, Australia

FAITH WITH UNDERSTANDING
(revised edition)

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry.

Dicker, Gordon S. (Gordon Stanley), 1930- .
Faith with understanding.

Rev. ed.
Includes index.
ISBN: 1 86407 120 6.

1. Uniting Church in Australia - Doctrines. 2. Theology, Doctrinal.
I. Joint Board of Christian Education. II. Title.

230.973

First printed 1996.

Cover design by Kelvin
Design by Robina Norton
Typeset by MacTop in Palatino 10/11
Printed by Shortrun Books

JB96/3694

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Foreword

It is fifteen years since I completed the manuscript for the first edition of this book. Many developments have taken place in that time. I had hoped to take account of some of these, as well as making corrections, when the opportunity occurred for a second edition. However, at the time it seemed to be important to keep the price of the book as low as possible. With the technology available at the time, that meant keeping changes to a minimum.

Now that a third edition is called for, new technology makes possible a complete rewrite without adding too greatly to the price. I have therefore taken the opportunity not only to correct many errors in the first two editions, but also to introduce a lot of new material and thoroughly revise the old.

Many changes have been made for the sake of style. For the first time, I have an editor to work with. I am grateful to Hugh McGinlay of The Joint Board of Christian Education for his suggestions, corrections and encouragement. This edition of the book will be a lot more reader-friendly because of his assistance.

Some changes have been introduced to make the language more inclusive. Though I aimed for inclusive language in the original edition, I was not consistent about it. This time I have tried to be more consistent and have also introduced gender-free language in references to God. Also since the word for spirit is feminine in Hebrew I have thought it appropriate to balance the use of masculine pronouns in reference to the Word or the Son with feminine pronouns in reference to the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, but not invariably, I have even altered quotations from other authors to make the language more inclusive. Where I have done this, the alterations are enclosed in square brackets.

Some people will find these changes irritating but we need to remember that language which appears to exclude half of the

human race is more than irritating to those who feel themselves left out.

Other changes have been made because new topics have risen to theological prominence, such as 'Creation Science', or because I have wanted to take a different approach to the topic. I do not believe there have been any changes in my basic theological perspective.

As the first chapter makes clear, I have no desire to tell readers how they should think or what they should, or should not, believe. I do not want to do other people's theology for them. Readers will often find me sitting on the fence. Sometimes it is because that is where I like to sit, but often it is because I want my readers to make up their own minds.

I see it as my task principally to provide theological resources for people to become their own theologians. It is for this purpose that I have included different views and models of revelation, the standard arguments for the existence of God, a variety of approaches to the problem of evil, the Chalcedonian Definition and similar material. Readers will also find a lot more material in books cited in the endnotes.

Many people have either written or spoken to me over the past fifteen years to express appreciation for the book. I am grateful for their affirmation. Others have written offering criticisms and suggestions for correction or improvement. I am grateful to them also, even if I have not always taken their advice.

As I wrote in the introduction to the first edition, there is little in the book on prayer and the spiritual life. This is not because they have been overlooked or are thought to be unimportant. In fact they are so important they deserve a book of their own. However, I want to make it perfectly clear once again that I believe that theology begins, continues and ends in prayer. That is how I wrote the book in the first place and it is how I have taught it and revised it. I hope it will be read in the same way.

I cannot thank everyone who has assisted in the writing and rewriting of this book, but I do want to express my thanks to my wife, Ruth, who has been a never-failing source of support and encouragement. Thanks are due also to the many students at United Theological College who have asked hard questions and taught me many things. To the College also I want to express my gratitude for the period of study leave to undertake the revision and get the whole book onto computer disk. Finally I continue to be grateful to John Mavor and John Mallison who got me started on this project in the first place, back in 1979.

Gordon Dicker
Advent 1995

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What is theology?

A brief history of the term

The word theology is derived from two Greek words: *theos* (god) and *logos* (word). It might be loosely translated into English as God-talk. In fact, the word *theologia* was first used by Greek philosophers to refer to the discourses of the poets about the gods and divine things.

In the Middle Ages, the term was taken up by Christian scholars and used to designate that part of *Sancta Doctrina* (Holy Doctrine) which dealt specifically with the being and nature of God in distinction from other sections which dealt with Christ, the Holy Spirit or the church.

At the beginning of the 18th century, particularly in Germany, *theologia* began to be used in a much broader sense to refer to all the intellectual work that deals with the Bible, the church, Christian doctrine, liturgy, pastoral care, etc. It is now commonly used in this way. A woman going to college to prepare for ministry in the church may tell her friends that she is going to college to study theology, meaning all those subjects which are considered necessary as a preparation for professional ministry.

At the same time, theology is still used in a much narrower sense to describe one particular component in that course of studies alongside, but distinct from, Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament, Church History, Pastoral Care and all the other subjects. It is theology in this narrower sense that we are concerned with in this book.

Sometimes, in this sense, theology is used along with one of several adjectives. In Europe people often refer to Dogmatic Theology (*Theologia Dogmatica*) or even just simply Dogmatics.

Unfortunately in English 'dogmatic' has a bad meaning. It suggests intolerance and closed-mindedness. Theology is not inherently like that. It may be practised by believing scholars but it does not entail a refusal to question, to consider other points of view or to think critically.

In the English-speaking world, scholars often refer to 'Systematic Theology'. The word systematic in this context can imply a number of things about theology but principally it suggests that theology in the narrower sense is orderly, coherent and comprehensive. That is certainly what theology at its best seeks to be.

Towards a definition

As *logos* about *theos* it was suggested that theology might be defined as God-talk. When we talk about God, we may, in some sense, be engaged in theology. Of course, talk about God may also be very loose, frivolous or even blasphemous. So theology is not just any talk about God. At the very least, it is thoughtful, informed and serious talk.

In English, the ending -logy occurs in many words, such as geology, biology and psychology. In such combinations, it does not mean simply talk, but a rational discourse on that particular topic or a study of the rational principles that underlie that field of study. So geology is rational discourse about the nature of the earth, the setting forth of the rational principles that underlie earth-study. Similarly, theology might be described as the careful, reasoned study of the divine.

This is certainly an advance, but it is too restrictive. Theology is not only a careful study of, and rational discourse about, the divine. Theology also wishes to speak about the creation, about human beings and their destiny, about sin, suffering and death, about church and mission, as these things are understood in the light of our belief in God.

John Macquarrie has defined theology as 'the study which, though participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available'.[1] This is a good definition. By making a religious faith the object of theology's study, Macquarrie keeps his definition broad and flexible enough to cover all that theologians generally seek to do. What is more, his definition could apply to Jewish or Islamic theology as well as Christian.

By requiring expression in 'the clearest and most coherent language available', Macquarrie's definition ensures that theology will be responsible and meaningful discourse, open to consideration by all people.

Another virtue of the definition is that it correctly implies that theology is a reflective discipline and not simply a descriptive one. Theology is not merely a description of what Christians believe. Even sceptics, or adherents of another religion, might do that quite well, just as Christians can describe what Moslems or Buddhists believe. Neither is theology just an orderly and systematic statement of the teachings of the Bible. That also could be simply a descriptive task with very little reflection involved in it.

Macquarrie's definition requires that the person doing theology not only reflect upon a particular faith but also that he or she actually participate in that faith. Theology, therefore, is a task for believers who experience the faith from inside, not for observers from afar. This distinguishes theology from philosophy of religion, which is certainly reflective but requires no participation in any particular faith or any religious belief at all.

While Macquarrie's definition is a good one, I prefer to make use of a definition that comes from the Middle Ages. St Anselm, who was at one time Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke about 'faith seeking understanding'. That is what I understand theology to be. To spell it out more fully, theology is the activity of people of faith seeking to understand that faith and its implications for their own lives.

Theology as faith seeking understanding

This definition preserves many of the virtues of Macquarrie's definition. It implies that it is done by participants and that it is a reflective task. It also makes it clear that theology is an activity and not simply something we have, a deposit, perhaps in a creed or a book. However, we shall see that Anselm's definition leads us further into the understanding of what theology is and how it goes about its task.

Why does faith seek understanding?

Faith always contains an element of understanding. It is never merely blind assent to some article of belief. What is more it seems to bear within itself an impetus towards understanding. In Paul's words, we seem to long to 'understand fully, even as we have been fully understood' (1 Corinthians 13:12 RSV). For such understanding, we must await a new kind of existence. Here we can only see 'in a mirror dimly'; we can know only in part, but still we long to understand as far as we can.

We long to grasp as much as we can of the mystery of God. We want to know that the articles of our faith are not contradictory to other knowledge we have gained. We want to know that our

various beliefs can be related to one another without inconsistency and that they make sense when taken together. We seek to understand in order that we may have greater confidence and therefore greater joy in our faith.

We seek understanding also because we are commanded to love God with all our mind.[2] How can we love God with the mind other than by exercising it in seeking to know and understand God and God's intention for all things? Not only are we commanded to understand God, God also calls forth our understanding by the infinite worthiness of God to be known and understood. God is the absolutely fascinating, interesting and beautiful object of the mind. By stimulating our longing for understanding, God is the motivating, energising source of theology.

Faith is also driven to seek understanding by the apparent puzzles and paradoxes of Christian faith and life. How, for example, can we say that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all God and yet God is one? How can we speak about the sovereign grace of God and yet at the same time hold on to human responsibility? How can we say with Paul, 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God' (Galatians 2:19-20)? Many similar puzzles could be mentioned.

Doubt

Faith is also driven to seek understanding by the experience of doubt. Doubt, or the questioning of faith, is a universal experience. Even Jesus faced the implied questioning of his faith in the Tempter's words: 'If you are the Son of God ...' Doubt is often regarded as a bad thing, but the questioning which doubt provokes leads on, in many instances, to deeper understanding, to rejection of false beliefs and the purification of our faith.

We may even dare to say that what is not questioned is not fully understood. At the time of the Reformation, in spite of the corruption to which the Reformers objected, the church itself was not really questioned. After dealing in the *Smalcald Articles* with some of the thorny issues of his time, Luther, when he came to the church, wrote, 'Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is'. Not only did a child of seven not know, even the Reformers themselves hardly probed the fundamental issues about the nature of the church.

Their main concern was to establish the marks of the true church, so that the true church (their own) could be distinguished from the false church (the other side). It is only in very recent times that the being and nature of the church has been radically called into question through the application of sociology to its life and

structures. The result of this is that the doctrine of the church is being thought through in the present era with a thoroughness rarely devoted to it previously.

Doubt changes

Doubt and the manner in which faith is questioned change from age to age and from culture to culture. The Reformers never dreamed of some of the doubts and challenges which confront Christians today, while some of the doubts that they faced no longer trouble us at all. The doubts and questions we face in Australia are not necessarily the same as those faced by Christians in Britain or Germany and they are certainly different from those faced by Asian and African Christians. In fact, it can even be said that questions which challenge the faith of one person may not worry another person living at the same time and in the same culture.

It is for this reason that the task of theology is never completed. It has to be done anew in every generation just as it has to be done afresh in every culture in which the gospel is preached. In fact, it can be said that every Christian needs to be a theologian because no two people face exactly the same doubts and challenges.

Indeed, all believers are theologians. The child who asks, 'Daddy, if God has the whole world in his hands, what has he got to stand on?' is being a theologian. The option for believers is not whether they will be theologians or not, but only how effective they will be as theologians.

For the same reason, theology is an activity, not a deposit of stuff from the past. It cannot be captured between the covers of a book. Each one of us needs to be engaged in that activity for ourselves. All that any theology book can do is to give an example of how one person is wrestling with doubt and seeking an understanding of faith, and at the same time provide some resources which may be of help to the readers as they seek to do the same things for themselves.

The relativity of theology

If doubt varies from culture to culture, so does the understanding of faith. Hence the expression of theology also varies. St Thomas Aquinas could understand faith in terms of the Aristotelian philosophy which dominated his culture. It would be a great effort for us to understand our faith in that way, perhaps even impossible. We naturally understand our faith in terms of the popular scientific world view which we take for granted in our Western culture today.

That being so, we must never lose sight of the fact that our theology is always relative, never absolute. It may serve us well, and we may even want to claim that it is true theology, but we

must never insist that Christians in some other part of the world, or in some other era, must understand faith just the way we do.

Theology as the servant of faith

Theology is not faith. That may be obvious, but it needs to be said by way of warning. It is to be done prayerfully, in the context of a living faith and in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, but it is at least one step back from faith. In comparison with the livingness of faith it may seem dead, difficult and obscure. We may easily become very impatient about it.

C. S. Lewis tells of giving a talk on religion to a group of men from the Royal Air Force. When he had finished, one officer got up and said that he had no use for the kind of stuff Lewis had been telling them about. It wasn't that he was irreligious. He said he knew there was a God because he had felt God's presence out alone in the desert at night. He had experienced the tremendous mystery. That was why he could not believe all the neat little dogmas and formulas of Christian theology. To anyone who has met the real thing, he claimed, they all seem so petty, pedantic and unreal. Lewis agreed with the officer. To turn from the immediate experience of God to theology is to turn from something real to something less real.

Lewis goes on to liken theology to a map. To look at the Atlantic ocean from a beach is much more real and exciting than looking at a map of the Atlantic, but if you want to sail across the Atlantic, a map of it, which draws on the experience of countless people who have sailed it and recorded their observations, will be of much more use to you than countless walks along the beach. Similarly, if we wish to develop our faith soundly and to live the life of faith, theology will serve us better than simply feeling the presence of God in the desert or in flowers.[3]

If we are inclined to be impatient of theology, we need to remember that it exists to serve faith. First, it does that by demonstrating the coherence and reasonableness of faith and so it increases our joy in believing.

Secondly, it serves faith by alerting us to those misunderstandings which would ultimately render genuine, living faith impossible. There are many examples in the history of doctrine which demonstrate the way in which theology has performed this service. For example, many people have lampooned a group of theologians of the fourth century who were deeply involved in the Trinitarian controversy. It was said that they were fighting over a single letter, since one group wanted to describe the Son as *homoousios* with the Father, while their opponents would say only that he was *homoiousios* with the Father.

This was a total misunderstanding of the situation. What they were arguing about was much more than an iota in a Greek word; they were concerned about the ground of our faith in the love of God and the revelation of God: whether the Son was of the same nature as the Father or only a similar nature. If the latter was the case, God has not sent us a Son, who is being of God's own being, but only one who is similar to God but different. We do not then have the same grounds for faith in the love of God that we have if in fact God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself.

Like many people, I love classical music, but I know little about the intricacies of hi-fi. I have been present when a group of hi-fi fanatics have been gushing over the latest equipment, discussing power and distortion of various kinds. The impression I got was that they never listened to the music because they were so hooked on the technicalities of the equipment. It required great will-power on my part to refrain from saying, 'Will you please shut up and let us hear the music!'

Yet although all that technical stuff is terribly boring and incomprehensible to me, I know it is important. Without people like that to insist on the best possible performance, there might never be equipment of extraordinary fidelity to allow me to experience in my own living room the music of the great composers at a standard equal to that of the best concert hall. So I owe a debt to these fanatics, and surely that calls for a little gratitude and patience.

All of this is a kind of parable that can be applied to theology. At least in part it exists to ensure that our understanding of faith is such that the experience of a full and lively trust in God, such as the saints have enjoyed in every time and place, will be ours also.

Theology is not purely defensive but it does serve to defend the faith against those distortions which may seem innocent, but which in the end will surely undermine our living communion with God. Therefore it is not to be despised, however badly it may contrast for the moment with the exciting liveliness of faith.

Theology as the servant of the church

Theology also exists to serve the church. It does this, first, by watching over its worship, witness and service to ensure that they truly glorify God. Secondly, it serves the church by seeking to make clear the nature of the gospel today, by clarifying the task of mission to which the church is called in its particular situation, and by directing the church's social action towards the achievement of God's justice for all people. Through its own dialogue with doubt within, it helps the church to respond to doubt and unbelief in the community at large. Thirdly, it serves the church by helping it to

reflect upon its actions, and the policy which underlies them, in the light of the gospel.

Theology for its own sake

Notwithstanding all that has been said about the service theology renders to faith and to the church, there is a sense in which it can be said that, as faith seeking understanding, theology also exists for its own sake. The famous French tight-rope walker, Philippe Petit, was arrested by the police when he brought Manhattan peak hour traffic to a standstill one morning by walking a rope between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, at that time the tallest buildings in the world. The police led him off for questioning and demanded to know why he was doing such a stunt. Was it for a dare? Was it some advertising gimmick? Was he out of his mind? Philippe, as sane as the day is long, answered quite simply, 'When I see three oranges I juggle; when I see two towers I walk.' No further explanation required!

Something similar can be said about theology. When you experience God in all God's awesomeness and love, when you have faith in God, you seek to understand. That is enough; no other justification is needed. That theology also serves faith and the church is an added bonus.

Though it has been suggested that theology may lack the vibrancy and excitement of faith, nevertheless it has rewards and joys of its own. Many believers find it far from dull and boring. In fact, for some it becomes so satisfying that it does seem to become an end in itself. Theology becomes an intellectual game for members of the club, with its strange set of rules and its nice distinctions, a head trip unrelated either to a lively trust in God or to the agonies of doubt and the human struggle. Not unnaturally, those who do not belong to the club find such theology arid and irritating.

Theology and spirituality

Theology, as it has been described so far, may seem to be a very cerebral activity. That it true though it is nothing to be ashamed of. Whoever we are and whatever our gifts, we are to love and worship God with our minds as well as the rest of our being. However, it needs to be noted that there is a branch of theology less concerned with rational understanding and more directed to enhancing communion with God. This branch of theology is usually referred to as spiritual theology or Spirituality.

Spirituality is concerned with the nature of our relationship with God, whether it is possible to cultivate this relationship from

our side and how, why it is that sometimes it seems to fail, why we pass through bleak times when it is the absence of God that is most real to us, how we can live through such times and how we may respond in a disciplined way to the grace of God when we experience it.

Until the late Middle Ages, theology as rational understanding and spiritual theology went hand in hand. St Augustine is an example of theologian whose work spans both fields. By the fourteenth century, a fairly clear separation had developed. The great theologians were purely concerned with theology as rational understanding, leaving spiritual theology to the experts in the spiritual life.

The same division was perpetuated in Protestantism and was made more serious by the sad neglect of spirituality. To be sure, Luther wrote some minor works in this field and Calvin was anxious to avoid the separation of theology from devotion and obedience. And there are some Protestant classics of the spiritual life, including works by Richard Baxter, Jeremy Taylor, William Law and John Wesley. These are notable exceptions and are way back in our history. Fortunately, in the last twenty-five years, we have seen a great rebirth of interest in spirituality in all churches.

For practical reasons, we also will have to continue this division and concentrate on theology as rational understanding, but at least we must give and heed the warning that theology cannot succeed if it is cut off from the life of devotion and communion with God. Theology must be begun, continued and ended in prayer. When this is neglected, theology easily becomes an esoteric and pointless game, or worse still, a new kind of heresy according to which salvation is no longer by grace through faith, but by understanding through intellect.

Liberation theologians have been reminding us also that faith and obedience are indissolubly joined together and that from earliest times there has been a branch of theology concerned with critical reflection on Christian action in the light of faith. In recent times, liberation theologians in the third world have raised this type of theology to prominence. We cannot do justice to this branch of theology here either, but we must note its importance and the warning that a theology which is not related to responsible, obedient action in the world runs the risk of incurring the same judgment as faith without works.

Sources and formative factors

In seeking understanding, faith turns quite naturally to certain authorities and makes use of various faculties and resources. Of these the following are the most important:

1. Scripture

Holy Scripture, that is the Bible, has a unique authority in the church and for Christian people of every time and place. It is the record of revelation and of the earliest human response to it.[4] It is to Scripture we turn before all else to hear the Word of God. It is not simply the final authority for Christians, it is the primary authority. It has a privileged position in theological reflection. In evangelical theology, all conclusions require authorisation by Scripture in some way. There is no room for articles of theology which find no grounding in Scripture, let alone contradict the scriptural consensus.

At the same time, interpreting Scripture for doing theology is no simple matter. One does not just look for a congenial text and say: 'Aha, there's the answer'. The Bible cannot be understood in this way. All texts have to be understood within their context and against the writer's background. There is also a great diversity of views in Scripture and this must be taken into account. For this reason, as theologians we are grateful for the work of faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture who enable us to understand the biblical witness in all its fullness.

Today, we are in an excellent position to understand the Bible better than ever before because so much careful historical, scientific and literary scholarship has been devoted to this end over the past century and more. Textual scholars have helped us to recover more nearly the text that was actually written. Linguists have made possible more accurate translations. Historians and sociologists have helped us to understand the background against which the various books were written. Various other forms of scholarship have given us deeper insights into the text.

While recognising that biblical scholars are also fallible, and therefore not according them more weight than is their due, theologians pay attention to the work of such people as they make use of the Scriptures in their task.

Some people may ask why it is necessary to go any further than establish and declare what the Bible says on any point at issue. The answer is that this does not really deal with the hard issues. It does not tell us how what the Bible says relates to the questions of our time. Assailed by the doubts and challenges which the culture throws at us, all we can answer is 'the Bible says so'. While it may be reassuring to know that, it does not help us to know why our doubts are unfounded, why the challenges posed are not critical for belief, or how we can believe what we do, yet still understand the world in the way we do. That is why in theology we cannot take the short cut and merely answer: 'The Bible says so'.

2. *Tradition*

The word tradition suggests to some people vague and doubtful stories which get passed on from generation to generation, being changed a bit as they go. Consequently, they find it hard to understand how tradition can be of value to theology. Or they may think of tradition as that which has always been done and which is appealed to in order to prevent anything new ever being tried.

Tradition, as we speak of it here, has nothing to do with either of these meanings. Literally, tradition is that which is handed on. In some families, there used to be a tradition of making certain things. The art of making violins, for example, was a tradition passed on from father to son or from expert to apprentice. That which is handed on in the church as tradition consists of such things as the decisions of church councils, creeds and confessions hammered out at various crises in the life of the church, the history of the church's mistakes and successes.

All of these things are of great importance as we seek to understand our faith today. They warn us against taking blind alleys which were found to be such centuries ago. They remind us of crucial points that must be held onto at all costs, albeit reinterpreted for our own time. Tradition is a protection against being carried away by the narrow visions and enthusiasms of our age. People can be parochial with respect to time as well as place. Tradition protects us against such parochialism.

Some people may still be suspicious of tradition and point our how the Reformers emphasised *'sola scriptura'* (Scripture alone) in criticism of the church's dependence upon tradition. This slogan was, however, an exaggeration. They could no more do without tradition than the church they criticised. Even to know what Scripture is they need tradition, for there is no Scripture which tells us which books belong to the Bible. Which books belong to Scripture and which don't was decided by church councils and their decisions are part of what has been handed on to us by tradition. What the Reformers were protesting about was tradition which was not subject to the critique of Scripture and even substituted for it.

Again in the case of tradition, theology cannot be content with merely repeating what is said in the creeds and confessions. Such repetition, though in some ways reassuring, cannot help us to see why our beliefs are valid in the face of objections and doubts raised by the thought-world of today. Though providing a valuable resource for us and pointers to the direction our thinking should follow, tradition does not relieve us of the necessity to work out for ourselves how our faith is to be understood today and why it

is valid in spite of the objections which modern unbelievers bring against it.

3. Experience

Experience is of many kinds. Most obviously, we bring to the task of theology our religious experiences, such as the experience of grace, conversion and renewal, prayer and worship, temptation and deliverance, participation in a community of faith and the sacraments. Our fellowship with other believers will make us aware that other people have religious experiences different from our own, though just as valid. We shall be trying to understand how faith in the one Christ supports such a variety of authentic experiences.

In addition, we will bring with us a rich experience of the world in which we live, not only the common experiences which crowd in upon us every day through our five senses, but also the disciplined experience gained through scientific observation and experiment. We shall want to know how our faith relates to and accommodates all this. We shall suspect any theology which cannot take account of well established facts of human experience.

Praxis

Part of our experience will be the knowledge and insights gained when we act in accordance with our faith. If such action leads to results which either create or perpetuate injustice, for example, or which are a practical denial of the gospel, then the understanding of faith on which the action was based must be seriously questioned.

On the other hand, action which springs authentically from the gospel will enhance our understanding of faith. Good theology is not done in isolation from the world or in an ivory tower; it is done in the midst of all the social, political and moral realities of life and alongside our efforts to live out our discipleship in the world.

Liberation theologians have used and popularised the word *praxis* to refer to this action taken as an expression of our faith. In their approach to theology, reflection on *praxis* in the light of the gospel holds a very important place. This, however, is by no means something new. John Wesley paid close attention to the results when people lived by a particular article of faith. In part, his rejection of the doctrine of predestination was based on the bad consequences he witnessed in people's lives when they lived out this doctrine.

Some theologians would want to make *praxis* a separate source for theology but here it will stand as one particular aspect of the source we call experience.

4. Reason

Reason is not so much a source of theology as a formative factor, but it is a very important factor. There is no point in theology at all if reason does not have a part in it. Indeed, unless reason is involved, we are without one of the major norms by which any system of thought or argument must be organised and judged. In theology, as anywhere else, two and two must make four and the rules of formal logic must apply. Were reason abandoned entirely, theology would become nonsense talk and would easily be discredited by the rational arguments of its opponents. Even within the community of faith we would not know how to distinguish one bunch of nonsense talk from another.

What we have been talking about so far might be referred to as technical reason because it has to do with the technical matter of what constitutes valid argument. There is also another kind of reason sometimes called constructive or speculative reason. Such reason attempts in its own way to arrive at religious conclusions or to construct religious proofs.

There has been an on-going debate in Christianity about the value of this kind of reason. Some Christians have argued that it has a valid place alongside revelation, while others have maintained that there is no place for reason of this kind in Christian theology. This is a subject we shall return to when we look at the nature of revelation.

We should note, however, that human reason is a very slippery thing. Its operation, like all human faculties, is subject to the influence of prejudice and self-interest. Our reason can always construct a magnificent case for almost anything we want to believe or do, and therefore we certainly have to exercise care in the use of reason. Nevertheless, heeding this warning, we cannot do theology without the use of reason.

5. Imagination

It might be thought that if there are dangers in reason, there are worse dangers lurking in the use of imagination. That may be so, and once again we need to take care, but imagination can also be used in a positive way. To understand the unique events described in the Scriptures, events in which we have not participated, we need to make use of imagination.

Also theology is expressed in words. Even if it remains in our thoughts, it is still takes the form of words. The words we use were, for the most part, coined to give expression to ordinary mundane affairs. To take such words and use them effectively in theology also requires imagination. To hit on the right metaphors and similes and the most illuminating analogies calls for imagination. The less

we use our imagination, the duller and less illuminating for others (and even for ourselves) our theology will be.

6. Culture

We have already seen how culture both raises the questions which set us on our journey of understanding and also provides the terms and categories in which we formulate our understanding. Language is part of culture. The influence of culture is something we cannot avoid. We are all dependent upon culture and to a large extent are moulded by the values, axioms and intellectual climate of our particular culture. People who think they can escape the influence of culture are deceiving themselves.

We notice the effect of culture most when we hear someone from another culture speaking about the faith and their understanding of it. At some points the other person's expression may strike us as odd and even false. If we are not aware of the manner in which culture affects us all, we may declare self-righteously that the other person's understanding is culturally influenced and false, while believing that our own understanding of the matter is unsullied by culture and is true. This is never the case, because there are no culturally neutral understandings of anything.

It should not be inferred, however, that culture has only a bad influence, producing distortion. Culture also makes understanding possible. If we were totally without a cultural background, we would have no means of making sense of anything. Culture also produces insight and lends colour to our expression. So culture also has a positive value in our efforts to understand our faith. We need, however, to be humble about our own understandings and theological formulations. None of us perceives the absolute absolutely, but only relatively, from our individual cultural perspective.

7. Christian community

It has been suggested that every believer needs to be a theologian and seek his or her own understanding of the faith. That is true, but theology should never be done in isolation. Rather it needs to be done in the widest possible Christian community.

Every theologian is a sinner. We all have our own particular prejudices and blind-spots, our self-interests and hobby horses. What is more, it is impossible for any one person to have a full range of religious experiences, to understand every part of Scripture or comprehend all the tradition. For that reason, we must listen to each other, supply each other's lacks and correct each other's faults.

Even a whole nation may have a particular bias or blind-spot. This became apparent as Asian and African Christians took a larger and more forthright role in ecumenical gatherings. At first, Western Christians were shocked at some of the things these people had to say, but in time they began to see that they needed to hear how fellow Christians from entirely different cultural backgrounds perceived and expressed the truth. Western Christians had been blind to certain aspects of the faith which African and Asian Christians, from their perspective, saw quite clearly. Of course, the opposite is also bound to be true.

For the same reason, Christians from different denominational backgrounds need to listen to one another. One of the most gratifying and promising developments of recent decades has been the way in which Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians have begun to listen to, and learn from, each other. In fact, the increasing dialogue between Christians of all nationalities and all denominations makes this the most promising time in all of history to be doing theology.

Of course, individually we cannot consult with all these other people, but at least through the written and recorded word we can benefit from the vision of a wide and representative range of Christian people. To be sure, in the end our theology is our own, but if it is to be also Christian theology, and not just a private personal philosophy of religion, it must seek to be as open and responsive to the whole Christian community as it possibly can be.

Prayer

Finally, it is important to stress again the importance of prayer. This is not just so that we may have divine aid and the help of the Holy Spirit, though that is important. When we talk about a person, we turn that person into an object, but people are subjects. The truth about a person is known truly only in dialogue. If I overhear someone talking about me at a party it always seems wrong; the truth about me has been missed.

It is the same with God, the subject above all subjects. By turning God into an object to be talked about, even for a while, will distort the truth a little. That is why Anselm once addressed one of his books of theology to God as a prayer. It might be interesting to try that for ourselves sometime, but even if that seems too cumbersome, at least we can do our theology in the context of extended prayer, that we may grasp the truth more nearly.

Notes:

[1] J. Macquarrie: *Principles of Christian Theology;* Scribners, 1966, p. 1.

[2] Mark 12:30. It is interesting that 'with all your mind' was not included when this commandment was given in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:5. It may have been a significant addition to the commandment which Jesus made himself.

[3] C. S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity,* The Macmillan Company, 1960, pp. 135f.

[4] What we mean by this will be clarified when we deal specifically with revelation in a later chapter.

2

THE NATURE AND REALITY OF FAITH

If theology is really faith seeking understanding, we must now ask what faith is. In doing this, we shall be drawing on some of the sources and formative factors mentioned in Chapter 1. We must also look at the arguments of those people who claim that religious faith is a projection or an illusion or perhaps a view that is sociologically determined.

Two meanings of faith

First of all, for the sake of clarity, we need to note that the word *faith* can be used in two quite distinct ways in the English language. It can signify a certain body of belief - the faith which is believed. We sometimes speak about the Christian faith and other faiths. For hundred of years, the kings and queens of England have held the title 'Defender of the Faith' because they were supposed to uphold true religion and maintain purity of doctrine. This usage, though common in English, is rare in the New Testament, though it does occur, for example, in the letter of Jude (verse 3) where the author tells his readers 'to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints'. In both Greek and English, this is a perfectly proper but secondary and derived use of the word. It will often be used with this meaning in this book.

However, faith primarily indicates an inner attitude of conviction, trust and reliance. It is faith in this sense which we must try to analyse and define more clearly in this chapter.

While we are speaking about words and their meanings, it may be helpful to observe that English is much richer in faith words than Greek is. In English we have a whole bunch of words with

similar meanings such as faith, trust, belief and assent. There is no corresponding verb for the noun faith, so we use the verbs believe and trust. In Greek there is really only one basic stem which serves both as noun and verb and does the work of many different words in English.

The biblical understanding of faith

Old Testament

Faith is of central importance in the New Testament, figuring prominently both in the teaching of Jesus and in the epistles, especially those of Paul. The word and even the idea of faith is much less prominent in the Old Testament. There are other concepts there which make up for the lesser importance of faith. For example, the fear of the Lord (which we might prefer to translate as respect, though that is a little weak) expresses one element of what we mean by believing in God. Another related ideal — found frequently in the Psalms — is that of taking refuge or shelter in the Lord.

Nevertheless, the notion of believing in God, and particularly believing in the word and promise of God, is not by any means absent from the Hebrew Scriptures. The most notable example of this is Abraham's belief in the promise of God, that he would have an heir and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:1-6).

The main Hebrew words that convey something of the notion of faith are *'aman* and *batah*. The first of these is well known to us because from it comes our word *amen*. The central idea expressed by this root appears to be firmness or constancy. The reflexive form of the verb means to be reliable, or constant, as God is (Deuteronomy 7:9). Another form of the verb can also be used in the quite secular sense of believing a report or a statement.

Batah and related words convey the idea of trusting in and hence of feeling secure. They tend to refer rather more than *'aman* words to an inward attitude and state. The prophets constantly call for a proper trust in God rather than in human powers and foreign alliances. One important reminder that comes to us from the Hebrew Scriptures is that one's own firmness and constancy is derived from that of the object in which one trusts. That is why the prophet Isaiah points out that there can be no stability for the nation without trust (Isaiah 7:9).

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Greek word *pistis* and the corresponding verb indicate either a sincere conviction that is less than absolute

knowledge or else trust in people and their word. Thus it is like the word 'believe' in English. We can say 'I believe that he is an honest man' (that is, a sincere conviction but less than certainty) or 'I will lend you this money because I believe in you' (that is, I trust you).

Even the most casual reading of the gospels will reveal the centrality of faith in the teaching of Jesus. He began his ministry by proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom of God and calling for repentance and faith. Faith was first and foremost what he required of those who came to him for help. Where it was not present he was not able to do any mighty works. The faith he called for was never just a mental assent to his teaching but a real 'counting on and trusting in God's power'.[1] Nevertheless it involved a unique response and attitude to Jesus himself as the one in whom the power and reign of God were present. It is significant that 'believers' was a common way of referring to the followers of Jesus in the early church.

As well as true faith, Jesus also spoke of false faith. There were people who followed Jesus just because they saw the miracles. They were not insincere but their response was shallow. There were others who confessed Jesus as Lord, but they did not do the will of God (Matthew 7:21). Genuine faith always issues in a desire to do the will of God.

Astonishingly, Jesus holds open the possibility that many who claim to have prophesied in his name, cast out demons and done many mighty works will not be acknowledged (Matthew 7:22-23). How are we to explain this? Two ways suggest themselves.

Firstly, it may be that though these people think of themselves as disciples of Jesus and believe that their works flow from this, they have in fact only been servants of some program, apostles of an ideology which they have confused with true discipleship. Or it may be, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 13:3 that what they have done is without love, and therefore without a genuine dependence of the Spirit of God. It is possible to preach, to prophesy, to speak in tongues, to have all knowledge and to have faith so as to remove mountains, but without love. Such faith, however great it appears, is deficient.

In the New Testament letters, especially those of Paul, faith is equally central. Faith no longer attaches to Jesus in a human and earthly sense (2 Corinthians 5:16), but Jesus Christ still remains central for faith. It is through faith that we are justified and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). Eternal life is for those who believe in his name, for those who confess him with their lips and believe that God raised him from the dead.

In the Gospel of John, the verb believe occurs more times (79 times) than in any other book of the New Testament, though strangely the noun faith or belief does not occur even once. The crucial role of believing for the writer of this gospel is clearly illustrated in what was originally the last verse in the book: '... these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name'. Clearly 'to believe' means here much more than to give assent with the mind; it involves the whole of one's being; it represents a complete reorientation of the self.

Faith is celebrated in the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews and the author's definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1) is often quoted as though it were all that needed to be said about the subject. 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'

In fact the meaning of the definition is not perfectly clear. It would seem that the author is offering two meanings of faith. In the first place, faith is certainty about those things for which God's promise gives us a basis for hope. Abraham, as mentioned before, would be a good example of faith in this sense. Secondly, faith is the means by which we grasp realities that lie deeper than our senses penetrate. Faith is therefore a kind of knowledge, the only knowledge we can have of unseen realities.

Faith in the history of Christian thought

Within the early church, the word faith continued to be used with the range of meanings found in Scripture, but as the biblical era became more distant and the authority of the church developed and became more centralised, so the meaning of faith contracted until it came to signify principally assent to supernaturally revealed truths of which the church was the custodian and interpreter.

This assent was not understood simply as blind acceptance. Though the mind could never have arrived at these truths unaided, at least it could perceive their inherent rationality. This perception, together with respect for the authority on which they were offered, be it church or Bible, was sufficient ground for the will to give voluntary assent.

In recent times, this view of faith has generally come to be regarded as inadequate. Firstly, it is clear that this view of faith does not do justice either to the teaching of Scripture or to our observation of faith in the life of Christian people. Secondly, the view of revelation on which it depended has been abandoned. Whatever we mean by revelation (and we shall have to look at that more carefully later), we can no longer understand it as the delivery of a number of true propositions to which the mind can

give assent. Thirdly, for the most part we no longer think of the authority of the church or the Bible as operating in that manner.

The Reformers' view of faith

With the Reformation there was a return to a more biblical view of faith. For Luther, faith was never merely a rational acceptance of doctrine but 'a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart'.[2] He could equate faith with believing in Jesus Christ, but this believing is much more than believing that the doctrines of Christ, and salvation by Christ, are true. It certainly involves this, but, more importantly, it means acceptance of the fact that what was done in Christ was for me. Faith is an acceptance of the promises of God and a firm trust in them.

Luther likens faith to a ring which clasps a gem. Its value lies not in itself but in that it grasps the gem and holds it in place. So faith's role in justification and sanctification is to hold Christ in our hearts so that Christ may perform his saving work in us. It is not faith that justifies but grace through faith.

Grace and faith belong together. Faith cannot come to be or continue apart from grace. Luther points out somewhere that when you hold out a bright object to a tiny child it automatically reaches out to take it. The reaching out is a response to the bright toy. So faith is the response that grace produces in us. In fact, it would even be correct to say that, for Luther, God justifies us by giving us faith.

Calvin

Calvin defined faith as a 'firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit'.[3]

Attacking the Roman doctrine of implicit faith, which Calvin took to be a kind of believing on the say-so of the church, he insisted that faith rests on knowledge, not pious ignorance. It is through the Word that faith is produced in us and sustained. Hence it always involves a measure of understanding, though such understanding is necessarily limited in this life. The knowledge involved in faith is not merely a knowing that God exists, but a knowledge of God's will toward us; it is not simply a knowledge of the promises of God as true objectively, but rather a knowledge of them that comes from inwardly embracing them.

With the mental aspect of faith Calvin joined an aspect belonging to the heart or disposition. Thus though Calvin allowed that there is an element of assent in faith, he went on to say that this assent is more of the heart than the mind. Being supremely a

matter of the heart, faith always involves a pious disposition and obedience to the will of God.

Like Luther, Calvin taught that the power of faith lies not in itself, but in the fact that it joins us to Christ.

Wesley

John Wesley also rejected the notion of faith as 'a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head'.[4] Following the epistle of James, Wesley asserted that even heathen people and devils are capable of such belief. Rather, he asserted, it is a disposition of the heart, 'a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of his life, as given for us, and living in us and, in consequence thereof, a closing with him, and cleaving to him, as our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption", or, in one word, our salvation'.[5]

Though the words differ a little, it is clear that Luther, Calvin and Wesley were in basic agreement about the nature of faith. In fact, if we were to follow this theme through Protestant theology right up to today, we would find substantial agreement on the nature of faith.

Some false or inadequate views

Unfortunately even today there are some wrong and unhelpful views of faith around. There is, for example, the view of faith that regards it as a kind of high voltage energy, a power in its own right. According to this view, if you can get faith's voltage high enough for long enough, any problem can be overcome: cancers can be cured, disabilities removed and all of life's difficulties resolved. So people are urged to have faith - more! more! believe harder! harder! If the desired result is not forthcoming, the reason offered is that you didn't have enough faith!

This is a false view of faith. It makes faith its own object. What we are really placing our faith in is faith, not God. It is also a very cruel view of faith. The person whose problem is not resolved is left not only disappointed but also in despair because his or her best efforts have not been able to produce sufficient faith. This is not what Jesus taught about faith. He did speak of little faith and great faith, but not in such a way as to make great faith necessary before God would act, or little faith a ground for refusing to help.

The disciples, astonished at Jesus' teaching, once said to him, 'Lord, increase our faith' (Luke 17:5). But Jesus answered them that just a small faith - faith as a grain of mustard seed - was enough. This is borne out by the story of the man with the epileptic son (Mark 9:14-27). 'If you are able to do anything, have pity on us

and help us', the father pleads. 'If you are able (you say)!' Jesus replies. 'All things can be done for the one who believes.' Then the father cries out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'

What sort of faith is that? 'Help my unbelief' is surely a confession of lack of faith. Yet paradoxically, even in that confession, the father practises faith by grasping for the help of Jesus. It is not a robust faith, not a faith at high voltage, just a tiny grain of faith, but it is enough. The power is in Jesus whom faith (even a tiny grain of it) grasps, not in the faith itself. The boy was healed.

There is another view of faith which likens it to a kind of betting. Those who hold this view would say that perhaps we cannot know for sure that there is a God, but on what evidence we have, it makes sense to bet our lives that there is. So we should choose to act on the God-hypothesis, preferring to run the risk of believing there is a God when there isn't, than the opposite risk of believing there is no God when in fact there is.

In defence of this view it must be said that, if that is the extent of the conviction one has, it is at least better than having no conviction and no commitment of life whatsoever. However, it does not do justice either to the biblical writers, for whom faith was a much more vital and reassuring reality, or to many Christian people of today who have a keen sense of the presence of God in whom they trust completely.

Towards an understanding of faith

Faith is a complex reality, difficult to grasp fully and difficult to define. In attempting to understand it, some people start with the general human phenomena of believing and trusting. They see faith as a fundamental dimension of human life. We all believe certain things to be true though we cannot prove them to be so; we believe in particular philosophies; we trust other people and in unseen realities; we commit ourselves to causes of our own choosing. So faith seems to be inherent in being human.

Australians are often said to be very secular people who do not believe in anything. Not so! They believe in many things: astrology, tarot cards, fortune-tellers, luck, ouija boards, Satan worship, extra-terrestrials, white racial supremacy, Marxism and a thousand other dubious things. When, as Christians, we speak to our community about faith, we do not speak to people who believe in nothing, but to people who have an insatiable appetite for believing, but not for believing in the gospel.

Some Christians argue, therefore, that we cannot understand faith in the Christian context by beginning with this well-nigh universal human phenomenon. We must start with God. Faith involves being related to God in a particular way. It is primarily a

response to a gift, an acceptance of God's grace which gives rise to a way of believing, trusting, committing and orienting one's life.

Faith as belief

Faith always involves a believing that so and so is the case. Christian faith involves believing that God exists and is revealed in Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that 'whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him' (Hebrews 11:6). Without such a belief any faith, as we understand it within Christianity, is impossible.

Faith is never, as one school boy defined it, 'believing what you know isn't true'. Faith is not irrational. It does not involve a sacrifice of the intellect. We can never truly believe contrary to our reason and we should not expect that of others. Yet, on the other hand, there is no sense in speaking about believing in what is beyond contradiction. It is said that a woman asked the author, Mark Twain, after church one day whether he believed in infant baptism. The author replied, 'Believe in it? Lady, I've seen it!' The question was certainly not intended in that sense, but Mark Twain's answer reminds us that we do not need to believe in what is already plain to the senses.

Nor is faith a non-committal assent to a particular belief. It is no big deal to assent to the proposition, God exists. The letter of James reminds us that even the demons believe in God - and shudder (James 2:19). Today, people say they believe and simply shrug their shoulders. One student said to her university chaplain, 'Sure, I believe in God. I'm just not nuts about him'. The demons are really a step ahead of that. As belief, faith moves beyond a cold, intellectual assent. It involves an assent of the heart and will accompanying the assent of the mind.

Faith as trust

Genuine faith always involves trust in that which we believe in. In that sense, faith is deeply personal. While we speak of sharing a common belief, we would hardly speak of sharing a common trust. Each of us must trust for ourselves. That means that faith in God involves a very personal relationship with God who is utterly trustworthy. Along with that trust go commitment and obedience.

In 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul speaks of faith as one of the three things that abide forever without passing away or being in need of change. When we know God as we are known by God we shall have passed beyond faith as belief. Sight will have superseded belief. But even then we shall still need to relate to God in trust, and so it is faith as trust which will never pass away but, like hope and love, abide forever.

Faith as knowledge, understanding and vision

Faith also involves a perception of what lies deeper than the surface, a knowledge of how things really are deep down. It was not the Pharisees or his enemies who knew who Jesus was, but those who loved him, put their trust in him and confessed him as Christ. This included his disciples but also some whom one would not have expected to recognise him.

The case of the Roman centurion whose servant was ill (Luke 7:1-10) is very instructive. About this man Jesus said, 'not even in Israel have I found such faith'. It was not the man's humility which caused Jesus to say that, though obviously his words, 'I am not worthy to have you come under my roof', demonstrate real humility. Nor was it the man's conviction that Jesus could heal even at a distance. The clue to the extraordinary nature of his faith is to be found in his words, 'For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it'.

What he was really saying was, 'I know you can heal with your word because I recognise that your authority is from God, just as mine is from Caesar. In you the reign of God is present as the reign of Caesar is in me. Though I may be only a lowly Syrian, no soldier would dare disobey me. And no power on earth can stand against you because all the authority of God rests upon you'.

This perception of the truth with such sharpness that he was prepared to act upon it, at the very time when the learned people of Israel were explaining Jesus' power as deriving from Satan, was what marked out the centurion as a man of extraordinary faith.

Faith as all-involving

All of these things - belief or assent of mind and heart, trust and commitment, and understanding - are essential ingredients in faith. No doubt there are others also which we might want to name. So faith is this complex reality which holds all these things together. Because it embraces so much, it involves those who have it totally. Faith is never something we can lock away in a corner of our lives.

A marvellous picture of this all-embracing character of faith was given to Vincent Donovan, a missionary to the Masai people of Tanzania, by a Masai man. Vincent had been speaking to the adults of the kraal about faith. When he finished, one of the men came up to him and pointed out that the Masai word he had used was not a very satisfactory one. The word Vincent had used meant literally 'to agree to'. The Masai man said that to have faith like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal from a great distance. Only his eye and his finger were involved. He went on

to say that if a person truly believes it is like a lion going after its prey. Nose, ears and eyes direct it to the prey. Legs give it speed to catch it. All the power of the lion's body is involved in the terrible death leap and the blow to the neck with the front paw which knocks the beast to the ground. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it with its arms and kills it with its powerful jaws. That is the way the lion hunts, said the Masai, and that is the way a person believes. That is what faith is.[6]

How do we come to have faith?

Some people would answer this question quite confidently by saying that the reason some people come to faith and others do not is ultimately a mystery hidden in God's good and sovereign but inscrutable will. God predestines some to have faith, and so be saved, while others are predestined not to have faith and be lost. We may be able to point to more immediate causes such as reading the Bible, listening to a preacher or the witness of a friend, but these things are simply means which God uses to achieve what has already been determined.

This is a very simple answer and it speaks to the sense of puzzlement we have when we see two individuals brought up in the same way, perhaps in the one family, subject to the same influences, yet one turns out to be a believer with a character consistent with faith, while the other turns out to be a criminal. Simple as it is, this answer raises some very difficult problems which have troubled theologians in every age.

Faith as socially determined

On the other hand, there are some who would explain faith as a point of view, an aberration even, which is a product of the society we live in. We are Christians, so the popular argument runs, because we were born in Australia at a particular time. If we had been born in India we would probably have been Hindus and if we had been born in Saudi Arabia we would surely have been Moslems.

Of course, there is some truth in that, but it does not settle the matter, because many people in Australia do not seem to bother about religious faith at all, while some people in India choose quite deliberately to be Christian, so we are bound to ask whether there are not other reasons, issues of truth, for example, according to which people choose one faith or another or even none at all.

This challenge to the objective validity of religious faith is formulated in a more sophisticated way by sociologists. Sociology, they claim, has shown how powerful non-cognitive factors are in shaping what people believe and hold to be true. The sociology

of knowledge has studied the relationship between human thought and the social conditions under which it occurs and has demonstrated a close correlation. For example, what people believe is right and wrong in sex is largely determined by the society in which they live. In early twentieth century Australia, homosexuality was regarded as grossly immoral, but in fourth century B.C.E. Greece, it was regarded as the highest expression of love.

The plausibility of any view, the sociologists argue, depends upon people's place within an appropriate plausibility structure. Thus people easily remain active church members in a small Scottish town in a largely Presbyterian setting, but when they move to a big secular and pluralist city like Sydney, they easily give up active association with the church. And the same goes for people of other religious persuasions in similar situations.

The Christian sociologist, Peter Berger writes: 'The mystery of faith now becomes scientifically graspable ... The magic disappears as the mechanisms of plausibility generation and plausibility maintenance become transparent. The community of faith is now understandable as a constructed entity - it has been constructed in a specific history, by human beings. Conversely it can be dismantled or reconstructed by the use of the same mechanisms'.[7]

In this way all belief is thoroughly relativised. Faith is just our outlook on the world from our place in a particular plausibility structure. It has little or nothing to do with how things really are. Yet (and this is the point Berger really wants to make), when everything has been relativised, questions of truth reassert themselves. Given that for sociological reasons people will believe all sorts of things, we are still left with questions about which beliefs have substance and which have not, which assertions are true and which are false. We are not ready to, and indeed we cannot, live in a situation in which all beliefs are equally acceptable and equally unfounded.

It is even possible to turn the sociologists' arguments back on the sociologists themselves. Their insistence on relativising everything is itself determined by sociological factors. They are not the only ones in society exempt from these influences. In a culture in which we have been made aware of the bewildering variety of beliefs, opinions, attitudes and practices, theirs is a fashionable attitude to take. It may well be, as Berger also suggests, that the loss of plausibility which religion appears to have suffered in our time, may be attributable more to this pluralism in our society than to any convincing arguments offered by the philosophers or any difficulties caused by modern scientific discoveries. The sociologists' case is not ultimately persuasive.

Atheism

In recent times, a number of thinkers have come to the conclusion that religious faith is ungrounded and untenable and have vigorously propounded their views. Widespread, self-conscious atheism of this kind is a fairly recent phenomenon. In ancient times, some people were called *atheoi* because they denied the existence of the gods of the state or of popular religion. For this reason Christians were sometimes called atheists, but of course this was a false description, because they did not deny the existence of every deity.

There have always been practical atheists who thought it a waste of time to think about God and who did not take God into account in the way they lived their lives. Even the psalmist knew of people who said in their hearts, though probably not with their lips, 'there is no God'. But that is different from the radical atheism of our times.

Some modern atheism is a response to the experience of evil in the world. Many Jews, for example, find it impossible to believe in God after Auschwitz. Bert Facey, in his book *A Fortunate Life*, after describing his rough childhood, his experience at Gallipoli, including the loss of a brother there, battling the great depression and the loss of his son in the Second World War, comes to the conclusion that 'there is no God; it is only a myth'.[8]

One must respect such a conclusion, and understand how it has been reached, even if one disagrees. We shall have to look at the problem of evil and its impact on faith later in this book.

Peculiar to the last two centuries are the self-consciously atheistic systems of thinkers such as Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. All of them claimed to be able to explain religion totally by means of their own theories.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) claimed that religion is the result of human projection. Because people do not find fulfilment in themselves, they project their desire for infinity and call their projection God. They make a god of what they are not but would like to be, but in doing this they diminish humanity.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was greatly influenced by Feuerbach and, like him, regarded religion as no more than a human projection. Marx, however, thought it arose not from the person's desire for infinity, but from human relations which are painful and alienating. He regarded religion as a kind of narcotic which people produce and administer to themselves, so that they can bear the inhuman conditions in which they have to live.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis (1856-1939), was totally unreligious himself, but was curious about religion. He thought he saw a similarity between the Austrian Catholicism he knew best and the people he treated with neuroses. He came to

the conclusion that religion is a kind of universal neurosis, an illusion, a wish-fulfilment, and developed an elaborate theory about how it came to develop.

All of these thinkers assumed that if they could offer a plausible alternative explanation of religious faith they had disproved its validity. Plausibility, however, is no guarantee of truth. All three judged their explanation to be sound, but they could not all have been right and may all have been wrong. Indeed many serious questions need to be asked about these so-called explanations. None of the theories has anything to say about objective reality. They do not really argue the case of whether God exists or not.

A reason for the faith that is in us

The failure of the arguments of the atheistic philosophers does not mean that we can simply forget them. They have influenced, and continue to influence, many people. Both as a witness to them, as well as for our own satisfaction, we need to be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us. We need to be able to say what it is that we see from our perspectives which make faith reasonable for us and give us confidence to go on believing. This is something we each need to think through for ourselves. We will not all come up with the same answers.

In my own case, I would point to the impression which the world, as a whole, makes upon me. To me it looks like a created world, made according to an intelligent design, not simply a product of chance. There is a livingness about it that gives me the sense of a presence which transcends us and the various parts of the world. Though many people in our society now lack this sense, or seem to, it is so widespread that almost every race and tribe of people shows some awareness of it and seeks to respond to it by means of worship and ritual.

While this sense of divinity is vague and leads to a variety of beliefs, some of them mutually contradictory, the question of God which it raises is a serious one, to which scholars of all kinds have devoted a great deal of attention.

In our Western society, it is hard to distinguish this sense of divinity from the ideas we have received through the permeation of our society by biblical teaching, but I would concur with H. R. Niebuhr when he observes that 'there is a natural knowledge of God prior, in time and in the logic of our hearts, to revelation'.[9]

Secondly, I believe Scripture has played an important role in bringing me to faith. There is the ring of truth about it. That is not to say that I believe everything there is literally true and correct, but at least it is true in the sense that when I read these Scriptures the penny drops and I say to myself: That is really how it is. That

is why I have this sense of mystery about the world. Now I know what life means; I understand who I am and where I am heading.

Above all, it is Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible witnesses, who has made a profound impact on me. The truth of his message is so transparent that I find myself thinking: 'He is right. These are words of eternal life he speaks to us'. His life of freedom for others and for God fully supports his teaching. The power of his sacrificial death is life-transforming and makes effective his call to discipleship. The story of his resurrection, which in any other case would be incredible, demands to be taken with utmost seriousness. Because of it I look for, and detect, signs of his presence and activity in the world.

I would go on to speak of the effect of faith in the lives of those who truly believe, of the persistence of the faith through the centuries, and of the church which, if it had depended purely on its human qualities, would have vanished centuries ago. The list could go on.

Grace and the mystery of faith

The things mentioned above are reasons for the faith that is in me. They are not proofs. We cannot point to such things and assume that our hearers will immediately come to faith just because we have drawn their attention to them. We must acknowledge that many factors influence us in coming to faith, and in not coming. While the arguments of the psychologists, sociologists and others are insufficient as an explanation of faith, undoubtedly some of the factors they mention, and many other quite mundane factors, influence our believing and our not believing. Yet, when all is said and done, mystery remains.

Part of that mystery is the mystery of grace and of human response to it. Fundamentally, faith is a response to God's grace, that is to say, God's kindness and love. Either not everyone experiences that grace, or they do not respond to the grace they receive. Neither the experience of grace nor the response to it is anything that can be arranged or manipulated by others. The best that can be done is to clear the ground, 'prepare the way of the Lord'.

Some would dissolve the mysteries of grace and faith in the acid solution of predestination, but that solution contains as many problems as it solves. It would seem to me to be better to live with the mystery while through gentle and obedient witness we 'prepare a highway for our God'.

Notes:

[1] G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1960, p. 131.
[2] *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 129.
[3] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, S.C.M Press, Vol. 1, p. 551.
[4] J. Wesley: *Forty-Four Sermons*, Epworth Press, 1944, p. 3.
[5] J. Wesley: *Forty-Four Sermons*, p. 4.
[6] Vincent J. Donovan: *Christianity Rediscovered*, SCM Press, 1978, p. 63.
[7] P. Berger: *A Rumor of Angels*, Doubleday & Co., 1969, p. 47.
[8] A. B. Facey: *A Fortunate Life*, Penguin, 1981, p. 314.
[9] H. R. Niebuhr: *The Meaning of Revelation*, MacMillan, 1960, p. 128.

3
Divine revelation

A definition

Revelation means the unveiling or the disclosure of something previously concealed. All gaining of knowledge involves such an unveiling, but the word revelation points to the kind of unveiling in which the initiative lies not with the knower, but with that which is known or with some other agent.

When Ronald Ross discovered what caused malaria, it was the uncovering of something which to that time had been concealed, but it was the result of an intense and carefully planned search to find the cause. Even though he thanked God for putting this information in his hand, it would not normally be called a revelation. When God was made known to Moses in the burning bush, it was not as the result of any search or program of experimentation at all. God was possibly the furthest thing from Moses' mind. The disclosure was at God's, not Moses' initiative and could properly be called revelation.

Biblical usage of the term

Some form of the word reveal occurs about 64 times in the canonical Scriptures. Many of these occurrences refer to people revealing things to others, just as today we can speak of people revealing information to us. Many are in the future tense and refer to a coming revelation, particularly at the end of time.

Some refer to things which God reveals. For example, in 1 Chronicles 17:25 it is recorded that David said to God, "For you, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him." It is not clear how this revelation has come to David, but

in Scripture God uses many ways to reveal things, including dreams, visions, signs and prophets.

These instances of revelation are not unimportant or without interest, but they do not deal with the central issue concerning revelation, which has to do with whether and how God reveals Godself to people. However, before we come to that it is important for us to recognise that God's revelation of other things through the various means mentioned above raises some problems. Not every dream or vision is from God, so we need to test every idea that comes to us in these ways. Dreams, visions and signs all require interpretation and even Christians can err in the interpretations they arrive at. Even prophets can give false messages. So we need to test such revelations carefully and widely in the Christian community.

God's self-revelation

There are only three instances in the Old Testament where God's self-revelation is clearly referred to. They are Genesis 35:7 (There [Jacob] built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.), 1 Samuel 3:21 (the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh), and Isaiah 22:14 (The Lord of hosts has revealed himself in my ears). Though we often speak of God revealing Godself through the mighty events of the Exodus, in the Old Testament itself the word revelation is never applied to the Exodus or the events at Sinai. So while the Old Testament does speak about the self-revelation of God, it does so very sparingly.

In the New Testament, the situation is not very different. In the gospels we have a statement about the revelation of God in Matthew 11:25-27 and a parallel in Luke 10:21-22. Here it is said that the Son alone knows the Father and may reveal the Father to whom he chooses. In Matthew 16:17 we read that the recognition of Jesus as the Christ has occurred because God has revealed this to be so. Thus the Son alone reveals the Father and the Father reveals who the Son is.

Revelation is mentioned a number of times in the epistles, for example in 1 Corinthians 14:26 & 30; Galatians 1:12 & 16; Galatians 2:2; 1 Peter 1:12 but none of these instances has to do with the self-revelation of God. More significant are references to the revealing of God's righteousness (Romans 1:17) and to a lesser extent the wrath of God (Romans 1:18). There are, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, many references to the revelation of God which is to happen in the end time, but none of these has any bearing on the question whether God has revealed Godself already and whether there is an on-going revelation of God.

The evidence shows, that even in the New Testament, references to the self-revelation of God are few indeed. This has led the biblical scholar, James Barr, to conclude that it is doubtful whether we have sufficient grounds for using the term revelation for God's self-communication and whether we can even identify a biblical concept of revelation.[1]

Gerald Downing, a British theologian, has gone further than Barr, and has argued that revelation is not really a biblical category at all, and that we would do well to drop all talk of revelation as a present reality and save the term for that which is promised to believers at the last. According to Downing, what the Bible speaks of is not God's self-revelation, but God's saving action.[2]

In the light of the biblical evidence, and what these scholars have to say, we need to be modest in our claims when we speak of a revelation which we have now. We need to confess that we do not see clearly, but as St Paul says, 'only in a mirror dimly'. Perhaps Downing is right that revelation which fully deserves the name will be ours only in the life to come, when we shall know as we are also known. We do not yet know like that. There is communion with God, yet mystery still remains concerning God's being.

Nevertheless we can and must continue to speak of God's self-revelation. We are not totally in the dark about God. Mystery is pushed aside a little, otherwise we would be confined to total silence about God. Even communion with God implies some knowledge of God. It is doubtful whether we could claim any communion with God at all if we were totally devoid of knowledge of God. And if we have knowledge of God, it is certainly not the result of any investigation on our part but solely because of God's self-giving.

In Jesus Christ we are given grounds for speaking about God, and fairly strict boundaries are set to what we may and may not say of God. Through Christ also we are led into communion with God. We may also insist that God's character and purpose are manifested in the history of God's dealing with Israel. Even if the Bible does not use the word reveal in this context, we may, because we have no other word that is adequate. However, it may be useful to take up the distinction made by Alan Richardson, between revelation which is an actual seeing at the end time (1 Corinthians 13:12) and what we have now, which he calls a revelation through faith.[3]

General and special revelation

A distinction which has commonly been made in recent times is that between general revelation and special revelation. Special revelation is that which is mediated through unique occurrences

to particular individuals. God's revelation to Moses in the desert was through the unique occurrence of the burning bush to a specific individual, Moses. General revelation is a little more difficult to define. Usually it is taken to refer to God's self-revelation in creation. Thus St. Paul writes, "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things [God] has made" (Romans 1:20).

John Calvin also taught that God had both planted in the human mind, by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity, and also disclosed Godself in "the whole workmanship of the universe", though he acknowledged that, without special revelation, it does people no good.[4]

Alan Richardson has used the term general revelation is a rather different way. He regards it as something given to all people, whether Christian or pagan, to make them truly human. Without the divine grace of general revelation, he maintains, no one could exist as a person. He believes that this general revelation finds expression in the great living faiths and in the ethical insights of contemporary humanism.[5]

It would seem, however, that what he has in mind would be better explained in terms of what is known in the Reformed tradition as common grace, or in the Wesleyan tradition as prevenient grace; that is, God's providential activity in the face of the fall to restore some measure of freedom and natural conscience to all people, so that they have the possibility and responsibility of being human and doing good.

The significance of general revelation

Whether or not it deserves to be called revelation, it can be affirmed that there are marks of the Creator in the creation. Just as something can be known of any worker through the things which he or she makes, so something can be gleaned about God from God's creation. As Calvin put it, "upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."[6]

However, there are two limitations to this knowledge. In the first place, just as what we can know of a person through that person's creations is limited, so what we can know of God through God's creation is limited. There is much more we need to know in order to come to a saving faith in God and to live a life pleasing to God.

Secondly, it seems that the marks of God in the creation can very easily be missed or at least misinterpreted by sinful human beings. To quote Calvin again, "... although the Lord represents

both himself and his everlasting kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull towards so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us."[7]

In spite of that, on the basis of these marks of God on creation, and with the aid of reason, many people have attempted to construct a purely natural theology, without recourse to special revelation. Such a venture is bound to have very limited value at best and at worst may lead to grave error. One only has to think of the way in which, during the Nazi period, German Christians were manipulated by their government's hypocritical use of natural theology into supporting the Nazis' militant nationalist ideology, to realise the dangers of a vague religiosity based on general revelation.

At the same time, the existence of natural theology as an empirical fact bears witness that people believe that they do see something in nature that speaks of its Creator. This may well be a point of contact for Christians as they seek to present the full Christian message, drawing on special revelation as well as general revelation. It may also help us in our approach to other religions if we remember that access to general revelation is something that all people have in common.

Perhaps the main significance of general revelation, however, is that since God's eternal power and divine nature can be seen and understood through the things God has made, people are, as both St. Paul and Calvin remind us, without excuse for not honouring God as they should.

Revelation and reason

Some people would question whether what is called general revelation deserves to be called revelation at all. If we arrive at some conclusions about the existence and nature of God by inspecting the creation and drawing some inferences about God from this, surely this is what has been referred to as the use of reason as opposed to revelation. Whatever position we take on this issue, it is clear that the contest between reason and revelation from the time of the Middle Ages on has made the nature and reality of revelation a hot theological topic.

The Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, human reason began to be exalted after the rediscovery in the West of some aspects of Greek philosophy. Since that time theologians and philosophers have been engaged in a constant debate about the relative value and necessity of reason and revelation.

St Thomas Aquinas represented the medieval synthesis of reason and revelation. According to St Thomas, reason can teach us correctly many things about God, such as that God is, that God is the Creator of all things and that God is good, but there are many truths about God, which are important for us to know, to which only revelation can lead us. Amongst these are the triunity of God, the necessity for atonement and the means by which God has provided atonement. So while reason can take us so far in our knowledge of God, revelation must be added to it to give the fullness of knowledge we need for salvation.

The Reformation

The Reformers were sceptical about the value of reason in religious matters because of the deformity caused by sin, so they tended to play down its role in our knowledge of God. As we have seen in the case of Calvin, in spite of the seeds of divinity within us and the marks of God on the creation, the Reformers held that we derive no benefit from these things, and it is only when God goes beyond these "mute teachers" and "opens his own most hallowed lips"[8] that God is recognised and we have trustworthy knowledge of God.

The Enlightenment

The philosophers of the Enlightenment (18th Century) took exactly the opposite view. They distrusted revelation and accepted only what could be arrived at by human reason. They did not necessarily wish to abandon religion entirely but their slogan was "religion within the bounds of reason."

The 19th Century German philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), reconciled these opposites. Hegel argued that both reason and revelation led to a genuine knowledge of God, but he believed that reason was the superior road to knowledge for those who were able to manage it. Revelation, however, could lead to the same truth and was certainly necessary for those unschooled in philosophy.

A contemporary of Hegel's at the University of Berlin was the theologian F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who again took a totally opposite view from Hegel. As he saw it, the proper province of religion is neither knowledge nor ethics, but feeling. Therefore religion rests neither on truths of reason nor revelation but on the feeling he referred to as the religious self-consciousness.

Darwinism

Another line of development in the 18th Century was the result of the impact of Darwinism. One effect of Darwin's theory of evolution was to give rise to a naturalistic view of reality which

ruled out revelation as incompatible with the new scientific understanding of the origin and development of life. This led to a bitter conflict between Christianity and Darwinism.

After a time, however, a reconciliation occurred between some parts of the church and supporters of Darwin's views. As a result, some Christian theologians placed a lot of stress on the divine immanence. The whole of nature was regarded as permeated by the divine life and evolution was understood as the unfolding of that life in all things.

Human history also was seen as an arena in which the divine presence progressively unveiled itself. Consequently, revelation was thought to come not from outside but from within humanity and within people who were most sensitive to it, manifesting itself more and more as each generation "stood on the shoulders" of the generation before it. The distinction between reason and revelation was blurred. They were the same reality, not distinct realities.

As a result of this development, the term progressive revelation became popular. It had several meanings, but according to one of these it was synonymous with the evolution of religious ideas. It was thought that all religion had developed from a single basic origin. As humanity's religious instinct and understanding grew, so religion also developed. The Israelites had a most precocious religious understanding and hence religion developed to its most advanced level (monotheistic, universal and ethical) most rapidly amongst them.

Though such a view is still held in parts of the church, most modern theologians have abandoned it.

Contemporary views of revelation

The world at large has certainly not become any more friendly to the notion of divine revelation, though reason, as it has been understood from St Thomas to Hegel, fares no better in the modern world. According to the scientific world-view of our time, neither reason nor revelation give us reliable knowledge; only our senses can provide us with that. Only those things which in principle can be measured, weighed and calculated are real. Theologians would respond that this excludes God at first base by human fiat, and thus divine revelation is also ruled out without argument.

The religious community, however, has not abandoned the concept of (special) revelation. But there is not total agreement on what it is precisely or how it takes place. There are a number of competing views. An American Catholic theologian, Avery Dulles, has isolated five different views, or models as he calls them, of the nature of revelation still commanding the support of some Christians.[9] We shall refer to only three of these models here.

The propositional model

According to this model, revelation is understood to consist of a number of true statements, or propositions, delivered for our instruction and belief in a supernatural way. From these propositions further truths may be derived by means of logical argument. This understanding of revelation requires an infallible source through which they are delivered to us. In the case of Protestants, this infallible source was found in the Bible while for Catholics this source was found also in an infallible papacy.

This view of revelation has been widely held in the past in all branches of the church but these days it is generally held only by conservative evangelicals. There are many objections to it.

Clearly not every sentence in the Bible is a revelational statement. Some are just statements of fact; some are parts of stories; some are even reports of enemies of true religion. Which then are the propositions of revelation? No one has ever produced a list of these. Even if we could identify them they would not really give us a knowledge of God because the knowledge of any person can never be captured in a number of true statements about that person. (Try giving someone knowledge of a personal friend by just using statements of fact about that friend.)

The model runs into even greater trouble when we recall how language changes. What was a true statement in the time of King James may totally obscure the truth in the 20th Century. The problem of translating these true propositions accurately from one language to another, say from Greek to English, is even greater.

Most importantly, Jesus did not seem to treat revelation this way. If he had done so, his method of teaching would have been totally different. He would have dictated a series of these propositions to his disciples to write down or to memorise. Instead he told stories like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan and revealed God through his life and action.

In spite of these difficulties, it is not to be denied that revelation can be propositional in the sense that God is free to use language as well as events, symbols or any other medium in the revelation of Godself. God's revelation in Jesus was through his teaching and his relationship with others, as well as through his birth, his death and his resurrection.

The historical model

As the name suggests, this model holds that God's self revelation comes through events in history. This is a view that has been held by many theologians in the present century and it has an obvious plausibility about it. Is it not true that God has been powerfully revealed in the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the events at Sinai

and the many acts of deliverance in the wilderness journeys? Hasn't God been revealed also in the history of the nation, the deeds of the Judges, the fortunes of the two kingdoms from David to Zedekiah, the Exile and return and then in the life and death of Jesus?

However, there are two main problems with this model. Firstly it would seem to rule out revelation through things that are not historical events, such as, for example, natural objects, words and stories, art and music. Surely God has revealed Godself in these things as well.

Secondly, at its extreme, this view of revelation holds that the revelation is objectively given in the events and can be read off the events by anyone who comes to them without bias and with the proper interpretative skills. This can hardly be true. Most people seem to have missed the revelation in the events of Israel's history and even the prophets had a hard time trying to convince the kings and the people generally of the revelational significance of those events. Even the events of the life and death of Jesus apparently revealed nothing to many people who witnessed them.

Undoubtedly God does make use of historical events, amongst other things, to reveal Godself, but there must be more to revelation than simply the events themselves.

The symbolic disclosure model

This is the model which Dulles prefers. He finds it in the theologies of a wide range of Protestant and Catholic writers. According to this model, revelation is not given in a series of true statements. It is never only an internal experience nor an unmediated encounter with God. It is always mediated through an experience in the world, but these experiences are not limited to historical events.

Essentially, revelation is mediated through symbols, that is, externally perceived signs which work on the human consciousness to suggest more than they can clearly say. Symbols, or signs, can be of an enormous variety, including natural objects, speech, music, art, historical events, or people, as in the case of Jesus.

The model is correct in recognising that revelation is essentially mediated though events and objects and is not an unmediated encounter with God. It is correct in holding that anything can be used by God to mediate revelation.

It raises the difficult question of what it is that causes a particular thing to be a symbol which mediates revelation, and not just another object perceived by our senses and nothing more. It certainly allows for the possibility that more is going on here in the person who receives revelation, and between the sign and the person, than sense perception and chance association. There is room to postulate an initiative that comes from the Revealer.

While the symbolic disclosure model has much to commend it, its weakness for our purpose is that it requires a grasp of a whole philosophy of symbol in order to understand it fully, and that is beyond the scope of this chapter. However an algebraic type representation of revelation by John McIntyre, a Scottish theologian who taught in Sydney for a time, may assist our understanding.[10]

The structure of revelation

According to McIntyre, revelation always involves three elements, so very simply we may represent it as follows:

	A	reveals	B	to	C
for example	The Exodus	reveals	God	to	the Israelites
or	The starry sky	reveals	God	to	the Psalmist.

If any one of these three elements is missing there is no revelation. If A is missing then what we have is not revelation, but a theophany, that is a direct unmediated appearance of God to a person. Many times it is said in Scripture that no one may see God directly and live. Without B, that is without God, the One who is revealed, there is no revelation but just a sense datum; the event or object is observed but nothing deeper is seen in it. Without C, a person receiving the revelation, there is no revelation because unless revelation is revelation to somebody nothing has been revealed, just as in class, if no pupil has learnt anything, the teacher has taught nothing, however busy he or she may have been.

McIntyre recognises that this algebraic representation, as it stands above, is too simple to do justice to the Christian understanding of revelation. Something further needs to be said about each of these terms.

Firstly, if A is a thing, a person or an event which reveals God to a person, it must be something more than just A. There must be something about it which enables it to point beyond itself. It must be truly a sign or symbol. For example, if Moses discovers that the burning bush is just an optical illusion, it is unlikely to be an occasion of revelation for him. While some naturalistic explanation may be possible, it cannot be the total explanation if the phenomenon is to function as an occasion of revelation. So evidently A has some special quality about it which permits it to function in this way. To express this McIntyre qualifies the first term by adding (x) to it thus: A(x) reveals B to C.

Secondly, if B stands for God, it is not necessarily the case that everything about God is revealed in a single instance. What is revealed may be one quality or attribute. Let us say it is the attribute y (for example God's righteousness). Then the formula would become A(x) reveals B(y) to C. Where Jesus is the revealer, we might

want to say that he reveals God's essential character. We could express this by modifying the second term to B(E).

The third term also calls for modification, because it is clear that revelation is not automatically revelation for everybody. There were plenty of people, for example, who did not see any revelation of God in Jesus, and the same is still true today. Even people who bring all the insight and mental ability they possess to a particular phenomenon may simply end up confessing sadly that they cannot see anything revelational in it. Why it is that we receive the revelation, while others do not, is beyond rational explanation. We can only confess humbly that it is by the grace of God that we see what we see. In other words, it is only because of God's Spirit at work in us that our minds are opened to the revelation. So the term C, which represents the receiver of the revelation, needs to be qualified in such a way as to indicate the crucial role of God's Spirit. So we may represent the whole formula as follows:

A(x) reveals B(y) to C(H.S.).

McIntyre's formula is congruent with Dulles' symbolic disclosure model. He uses it in his discussion of what it means to say that Jesus was both human and divine, but it can also be used to demonstrate how modern theologians differ in their understanding of revelation. For example, according to the extreme version of the historical model there is no need to qualify C at all because revelation is not dependent upon any special work of the Holy Spirit in the receiver. However, McIntyre's formulation and the process by which he developed it is included here in the hope that it may help us to see more clearly all that is involved in an occurrence of revelation.

The consequences of revelation

We believe that in revelation we are given a genuine knowledge of God's nature. We cannot say, however, that the full mystery of God's being is disclosed to us. Mystery remains but it cannot be such as to negate the understanding of God given in revelation. If it did, what we would have would not be a revelation but a deception. Of course, we cannot prove that revelation is genuine any more than we can prove that our friends are showing us their true selves and not misleading us. In both instances we have to judge for ourselves whether what is disclosed to us is genuine. It is on that basis alone that we can relate to others in trust and confidence.

A more important consequence than knowledge of God is relationship with God. As mentioned earlier, even with what we now call revelation, we do not yet know God as God knows us.

The truth is uncovered a little but mystery remains. What has changed significantly is that we are now related to that mystery in a new way. Through revelation it becomes a relationship of grace and trust.

Through that relationship everything is seen in a new light, Christ, the world and ourselves. As Calvin points out[11], we cannot truly know humanity until we know God. We do not truly know ourselves until we know ourselves in the light that is shed upon us and all people by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Revelation is also intimately connected with salvation. All knowledge of God is to some extent saving knowledge, and every genuine, trustful relationship with God is a saving relationship. The Scottish theologian, John Baillie, put it this way: "If we look broadly at the history of religion, we see that what is believed to be revealed is always some clue to a deeper significance of the human situation than appears upon its surface, and at the same time a way of easement or deliverance."[12]

This is particularly true of the Christian revelation. It is totally bound up with the nature of God as love and the way of salvation God has provided in Jesus Christ.

Revelation and Holy Scripture

Already the importance of the Bible for Christians and its importance in doing theology has been mentioned. Now, in the light of what has been said about revelation, we need to look at it again and ask the question how Scripture relates to revelation.

Scripture equated with revelation

Some people regard Scripture as the inerrant words of God and therefore they equate it directly with revelation. Such a view has been held from very early in Christian history. However, it was not until after the Reformation that this view was systematically developed and widely held. This view was not held by Luther. Calvin came closer to it, but it was Calvin's successors who went all the way in developing the idea of an infallible Scripture.

The authors were held to have been so prepared and guided by God that they not only conveyed the ideas that God wanted them to convey, but even the words they used were precisely the words God intended them to use. On this view, the Scriptures convey truths of revelation to be accepted without question, and faith becomes essentially assent to the true propositions, or statements, supernaturally delivered through the agency of the writers.

While this view is still held in many parts of the church, it is certainly not any longer the majority view. It is mostly rejected for the following reasons:

(i) The writers themselves do not suggest that they were passive instruments in the manner suggested by the theory. There are many instances where the writers were obviously labouring with difficult ideas and the complexities of their own experiences (Romans 7, for example). In places St Paul even admits that he does not have a command from the Lord, but offers his own conviction (1 Corinthians 7:25). The conclusion we have to draw is that, in the writing of Scripture, both God and people had a part to play and where that happens human sinfulness inevitably introduces error.

(ii) The theory is not supported by an examination of Scripture. Contrary to the theory, the Greek styles of the authors, their personalities and personal interests are reflected in their writings. It is clear from this that they were not passive instruments. What is more, they give us conflicting information, for example, on when the cleansing of the temple took place, whether Jesus allowed divorce for a single reason or for none, the details of the resurrection appearances and the fate of Judas after his betrayal of Jesus. We are even given to understand that hares are ruminant animals, chewing the cud like cows (Leviticus 11:6 and Deuteronomy 14:7).

We must face these things honestly. It is idle pretence to suggest that they can all be explained away. But if they cannot be, then the Bible cannot be the infallible words of God and it cannot be equated quite simply with revelation.

This is not said to diminish the importance of the Bible or minimise its role in the church or in our lives. This is pointed out because it is important to recognise the human aspect of Scripture (along with the divine) so that we may interpret it correctly and understand rightly its relationship to revelation.

The liberal Protestant view

We would equally want to reject the view widely held earlier this century by liberal Protestantism. This view held that Scripture is simply a record of people's developing understanding of the nature of God and the interpretation of events in their lives in accordance with their understanding. The Scriptures are helpful just so far as we find them helpful, according to this view. They are most likely to be of value to us if we look for the noblest conception of God contained in them and reject the rest as partial or even false.

According to this view, it is very problematic whether there is any relationship between Scripture and revelation. However, it fails to take account of the fact that the Bible is much more than a collection of people's views. For one thing, it records events which were absolutely decisive in determining what and how people thought.

What is more, people have found that it is often through those portions of Scripture which the liberals rejected as outmoded that God speaks to us words of grace or correction. Their experience teaches them not to ignore or dismiss any parts of Scripture. We are not the judges of Scripture; it judges us, sometimes in the most unlikely places. The appropriate attitude to Scripture is one of humility (which certainly does not exclude questioning, but does include teachableness), not arrogance.

The inspiration of Scripture

Only once does the Bible itself speak about the inspiration of Scripture, that is in 2 Timothy 3:16, which says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." The word translated as "inspired" means literally "God-breathed" and occurs nowhere else in the Bible. Fundamentalists take this to mean that God actually placed in the minds of the writers the ideas they were to convey and even the words they were to use in doing so. It is on this basis that Scripture and revelation were equated.

Nowhere in Scripture does God's breathing upon the creation, especially upon people, result in the conveying of messages in this way. In the Bible, God's breathing always means one of two things, either the giving of life to that which is lifeless, or the giving of the Holy Spirit.[13] Therefore the inspiration of Scripture can mean either of two things. It can mean that it has been produced by people, and a great many at that, who were enlivened and moved by the gift of the Spirit, so that it actually shows in the quality of what they have produced.

Secondly, it can mean that God breathes life into the text as God chooses.The verse can be translated equally validly as "every scripture inspired by God is also profitable for teaching."[14] In this case, inspiration is something that may happen to Scripture, or may not, but when it does it is because God breathes life into it so that it is more than the dead letter of ancient writings and becomes profitable for teaching as well as many other purposes.

Around the middle of the 20th Century, a view of Scripture of this kind was propounded by the great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. According to Barth, the Word of God is the Word which God addresses to humankind in Jesus Christ. Derivatively it may be said that the Word of God exists as written in Scripture, and as preached.

These forms of the Word, incarnate, written and preached, are not the same. They cannot be simply equated. The Scripture is not the Word of God in the same way that Jesus Christ is. The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus Christ and become the Word of God when

the Holy Spirit, acting upon people's hearts and minds, reveals to them through the Scriptures the hidden things of God.

According to this view, we may certainly speak of Scripture (though not only Scripture) as being inspired. We may also speak of it as bearing witness to revelation, but we cannot equate it quite simply with revelation.

Primordial and subsequent revelation

At this point it may be helpful to consider a distinction, which has been made by several theologians, between classic or primordial revelation, on the one hand, and subsequent or secondary revelation on the other.[15]

By the former is meant those revelatory events or occasions upon which a community of faith is founded and which become patterns for experiences of the holy within that faith. By subsequent or secondary revelation is meant those events or experiences through which the primordial revelation comes alive again and revelatory for successive generations.

Thus Judaism was constituted by the primordial revelations of the Exodus, Sinai, etc. The prophets kept returning to that revelation and exploring what it meant for the on-going life of Israel. Christianity stands upon the primordial revelation in Jesus Christ. Christians today are not part of those classic revelatory events in the way that Peter, James, John, Mary and the others were. But through the record they have left us, in conjunction with other triggering factors, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, that revelation comes alive for us again in new ways, and we come to know Christ and through Christ enter into relationship with God.

It is helpful to keep this distinction in mind. In the first place, it helps us to understand in what sense we are able to say that God continues to reveal Godself and in what sense we may want to say that Christ is for us God's final revelation. If it were claimed that there are further primordial revelations Christianity would be led off on some quite new track in the same way that the revelation in Jesus led Christianity off on a pathway that is different from Judaism. For this reason it can be argued that Mormonism, with its claim to a new and later revelation in the Book of Mormon, is not really a Christian denomination, but a different religion.

The distinction also helps us to see why Scripture cannot be equated quite simply with revelation. Classic or primordial revelation is not something found in Scripture. It took place at the burning bush in the desert, at the Red Sea and at Sinai. It took place at a particular time in Galilee and in Jerusalem. We were not there to participate in these things. Moses and Miriam, James and John and Mary were. Many years later a record of what they

experienced in these revelatory occasions was made. That record, together with human responses to the revelations, we call the Bible.

Today people read that record in the midst of life's events and sometimes as they do so, it comes alive for them and there is a moment of revelation, which, for the people concerned, is a momentous event. Or it may happen, not in the reading of Scripture, but with the scriptural record as a memory - even a dim memory. But now it is that momentous, life-changing event which is the revelation, not the Scripture itself.

Scripture, then, is a kind of bridge between the classic or primordial revelations to which it bears witness and the occasions of revelation which light up our lives today and enable us to share in the faith of all the men and women throughout the ages who have rejoiced to call themselves Christ's followers.

Notes

[1] *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, T. & T. Clark, 1963 p. 849.
[2] G. Downing: *Has Christianity a Revelation?*, S.C.M. Press, 1964
[3] A. Richardson, (ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, S.C.M. Press, 1969, p. 294.
[4] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, S.C.M. Press, 1960, Book I, chs 3-5.
[5] Book and page cited in note 3.
[6] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 52.
[7] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 63.
[8] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 70.
[9] See A. Dulles: *Models of Revelation*, Doubleday & Co., 1983. For a shorter introduction to the subject see "The Symbolic Structure of Revelation" in *Theological Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 1, March 1980. pp. 51-73.
[10] J. McIntyre: *The Shape of Christology*, pp. 146ff.
[11] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pp. 37f.
[12] J. Baillie: *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 42.
[13] For a fuller discussion of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, see my book, *The Bible with Understanding*, J.B.C.E., 1988, chapter 10.
[14] See the footnote to 2 Timothy 3:16 in the NRSV.
[15] See, for example, J. Macquarrie: *Principles of Christian Theology*, Scribners, 1966, p. 7.

4

The doctrine of the Trinity

It may be surprising that we come to this doctrine so soon. Many people would regard it as a non-essential afterthought, best left to an appendix if dealt with at all. However, since very early in Christian history, this doctrine has been regarded in the church as embodying the distinctively Christian idea of God. Some theologians would go so far as to say that it is the central doctrine of the faith.

Certainly we cannot go very far in Christian theology without touching upon it and raising the questions it seeks to answer. Therefore we cannot postpone this subject, however difficult or contentious it may be. If the Christian understanding of God is essentially triune, then there is no point in our discussing the existence and nature of some other kind of God. It is the God who, it is claimed, is revealed and understood in this way about whom we must inquire.

What is the doctrine of the Trinity?

Within the broad stream of Christian orthodoxy, the doctrine of the Trinity may be understood in a number of ways. Fundamentally, what it affirms is that there is a threeness within the unity of the one God and that there is a unity underlying and overarching the three whom we speak of as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The mere occurrence of the three names together does not constitute a doctrine of the Trinity since the three might be regarded as quite unlike and only loosely related. Only if it is affirmed that all three are co-eternal and undivided can we speak of a genuine trinity.

It should be understood quite clearly from the beginning that the doctrine does not speak of the Holy Trinity as God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In the first place, Jesus is the man of Nazareth, born of Mary. Were it said quite simply that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, he would not be a human being at all and presumably his existence in the flesh would have been some kind of illusion.

Rather, what is said is that in Jesus of Nazareth the divine Son, Word or Wisdom was incarnate, that is enfleshed. This is said very clearly in the first fourteen verses of John's Gospel, where, after speaking of the Word who was with God from the beginning and indeed was God, the author goes on to say, 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us'.

Also we may not speak of God, Son and Holy Spirit because either all three are God or we have three gods. That is why the doctrine speaks of one God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The problem of language

The limitations of language make discussion of the doctrine very difficult. It is important to be careful and precise in the way we speak, otherwise great confusion will ensue. In these days, we have also a second language problem, namely the offence that is given by gender specific terms such as Father and Son. I would plead with readers at this stage to bear with these terms without being offended by them, since they are the terms in which the doctrine has traditionally been stated. At the end of the chapter, we shall look at ways in which we may be able to overcome, or at least minimise this problem.

What the doctrine is about

Many people find the doctrine repugnant because they take it to be about some weird kind of divine mathematics which they regard as humbug. It is true that the problem of mathematical oneness and threeness has seemed to dominate the discussion throughout history, but this is not what the doctrine is about, though I hope to show that some sense can be made of it.

Others find the doctrine to be a stumbling block because it appears to remove all mystery from the divine being and sum up in a neat little formula the inner dynamics of God's nature. Indeed the very opposite is the case. The doctrine affirms that there is much more to the nature of God than simply being a unity. There is a rich and mysterious inner being to God's essence. That can never be fully known to mortals, for God is ineffable, but in an inadequate and preliminary way the doctrine of the Trinity points to that mystery.

The doctrine is principally about three things, in ascending order of importance: It is about the grammar and vocabulary Christians use to speak of God and to speak of the significance of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, it is about the faith affirmation that God truly reveals Godself, or as Emil Brunner has put it, about 'the unity of the nature and the revelation of God'.[1]

Thirdly, the doctrine is a faith affirmation that God has what it takes to make the gospel a reality. In other words, the point of the doctrine is human salvation. This has always been its principal thrust. Even at Nicea where the first steps were taken in formulating the doctrine, Athanasius and his bishop, in standing resolutely against Arius and his allies, understood that salvation was the matter at stake.

Since this is what the doctrine is about, we should not think of it as being erudite and irrelevant like the discussion of how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. It addresses concerns which are both practical and important.

The Bible and the Trinity

The first Christians were either Jews, or Gentiles attracted to the Jewish religion. So they came to the Christian faith with a profound conviction that God, the Creator and Lord, is one. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:4.) The Hebrew Scriptures express a special horror of polytheism. In contrast to the Canaanites with their many Baalim and the Greeks and Romans with their pantheons of gods, the Jews insisted that there is only one God.

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures appears to be a unity in every sense. They do not attribute to God any internal distinctions and they do not even make any clear distinctions regarding the manner of God's relating to people in the world. There is certainly no signs of trinitarianism there. At most, there is a beginning of a process which led to the personalising of the divine Wisdom (Job 28:12f., Proverbs 8), but to make anything significant of this development we have to look back at it through Christian eyes.

When Christians began to reflect on the nature of God in accordance with their experience of revelation and salvation through Christ and the Spirit, they had absolutely no thought of abandoning the strict monotheism in which they had been brought up. Tritheism was definitely not an option for them.

However, they felt constrained to enrich their understanding of the nature of the unity of God. They were convinced that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself, and that in the Holy Spirit poured out on the church, the risen ascended Lord, indeed the Almighty God, is constantly present to those who

believe. The full doctrinal implications of these convictions were not immediately clear to them. A fully thought-out doctrine of the Triune God was still a couple of centuries away, but they had started a process which was to lead eventually to that end.

New Testament evidence

Even in the case of the New Testament, a doctrine of the Trinity cannot simply be read off the Scriptures. Had that been possible, the church would not have had to spend centuries arguing about it and seeking to arrive at a satisfactory statement of the doctrine. What the New Testament does is to provide the data which supply a warrant for the church to move in that direction.

1. Firstly there are what might be called binitarian formulae and passages, that is to say suggestions of a two person God. A prime example is found in 1 Corinthians 8:6 ('For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'). Many of St Paul's greetings bring together God and Jesus Christ in a quite striking way. This would have been as shocking to a non-Christian Jew as it would be to us today to find some modern religious person offering a blessing from God and from John Lennon.[2]
2. There are many passages in the New Testament which are constructed on a triadic foundation. An example is 1 Peter 1:1-2 ('To the exiles of the Dispersion ... who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood'). Other examples will be found in Romans 1:3f.; 1 Corinthians 6:11 & 12:4f.; Galatians 3:11-14; Ephesians 2:11-18.[3]
3. There are instances where common assertions are made about God the Father and also Christ (the Son) and/or the Holy Spirit. An example of this is Revelation 1:8 taken together with 22:7-13, 16, 20, where both God and Christ are referred to as the Alpha and Omega.
4. There is the well-known trinitarian formula found in Matthew 28:19 ('... baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'). The Corinthian benediction found in 2 Corinthians 13:14 is an example of a significant early triadic formula.

As already stated, this evidence does not in itself constitute a doctrine of the Trinity. There is, for example, no statement of how Father, Son and Spirit are related. Some of the data seem contradictory. For instance, there are passages like John 1:1-14, which speak of the pre-existence of the Word who became incarnate in Jesus, but there are also passages, particularly in Acts, which suggest

that Jesus was a good man whom God adopted as Son (Acts 2:22 and 36; 17:31). There are passages which are subordinationist in character, such as 1 Corinthians 11:3 and John 14:28, while there are other passages which suggest the equality of the persons, such as John 10:30 and the Revelation passages mentioned above.

Numerous other problems might be mentioned, but these examples are enough to indicate that the Bible presents us with a mass of mixed evidence, so that the church had a great deal of strenuous thinking to do before it arrived at a coherent doctrine.

It might be added that the word Trinity nowhere occurs in the Bible. The earliest discovered uses of it are in Theophilus of Antioch around C.E. 180 (Greek) and in Tertullian around C.E. 200 (Latin).

Developments after the New Testament era

The first attempts to go beyond the unsystematic statements of Scripture towards a coherent doctrine were made by the Christian Apologists of the second century. On the one hand, they had to refute the charge that, because Christians refused to worship the gods of the empire and the popular religions, they must be atheists. On the other hand, they had to defend Christians against the charge of worshipping numerous gods, because of the reverence they gave to Jesus. To many outside the church, especially Jews, it appeared that Christians had fallen back into pagan polytheism.

While the Apologists were engaged in defending Christianity, they were also helping Christians to clarify exactly what it was they believed about Christ and his relationship to God. To a lesser extent they were concerned to define the nature of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's relationship to Christ and to the Father.

A common way of speaking was in terms of the Divine Triad, consisting not of co-equal persons, but of a single person, God, within whom they distinguished God's mind or reason, and God's wisdom. By speaking in this way they took up the idea of the *Logos* (Word, Reason) which was familiar in the Judaeo-Hellenistic world, and of Wisdom (*Sophia*) which was personalised in the Hebrew Scriptures of Job and Proverbs.

However, it was principally on the question of who Christ was that debate and controversy centred in this period. It was this Christological debate which made the running for the formulation of trinitarian doctrine. There were five Christologies, drawn from the New Testament and popular philosophy, which vied for the exclusive support of the church.

Adoptionism

The adoptionists held that Jesus was a normal human being born of Mary (and Joseph) who was so good and so obedient to God,

that God adopted him and elevated him to be son of God. They found justification for this view in such passages as 'You are my Son, the Beloved; today I have begotten you.' (Luke 3:22 NRSV margin), and Acts 2:36.

Clearly, such a son might be called divine but certainly would be of very different nature from Godself. Those who held this view came to be known in the church as Monarchians because their view of Christ did not threaten in any way the divine unity and uniqueness.

A slight advance on this was what might be called Virgin Birth Christology. While adoptionism seemed to hold that God was simply waiting until in the course of events a person might turn up whom God could adopt, the Virgin Birth Christology maintained that God took the initiative and at the chosen time and in the chosen way brought that person to birth.

However, the Virgin Birth does not, on its own, make any advance on adoptionism with regard to the nature and status of that man. Perhaps it is for that reason that neither St Paul nor the author of John's Gospel refer to the Virgin Birth at all. It did not help them at all to say what they needed to say about Christ.

The Virgin Birth has continued to have a place in Christian theology but its role in Christology has been a minor one and is usually found in association with more advanced Christologies.

Pre-existence Christology

A third Christology maintained that Christ existed with God before the birth of Jesus and even before the foundation of the world. However, it stops short of saying that Christ was one with God, co-eternal and co-equal. This view was found extensively in the writings of St Paul and in the letters attributed to him. For example, when in Galatians 4:4 it is said, 'when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son', the implication is that the Son already existed to be sent, and did not come into being only when Mary gave birth to Jesus. In Colosssians 1:15-20, the pre-existence of Christ is clearly taught, though whether it fully identifies Christ with God has been hotly debated through the centuries.

This Christology clearly goes well beyond adoptionism, but it leaves open the question of the precise nature of the relationship between Christ and God. For that reason, it became the basis for one of the most persistent counter-Christologies in Christian history, represented by Arianism for centuries and present with us still in the Watchtower people.

Modalism

The Modalists, also known as Monarchians, went further than the advocates of pre-existence Christology. They quite explicitly

identified the pre-existent Son with God. One noted modalistic Monarchian, whose name was a synonym for modalism, was Sabellius (early 3rd Century).

According to Sabellius, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all one without any real distinction. They are simply different names for manifestations of the one God in different times and circumstances. As Father, God is creator and law-giver; as Son, God is incarnate in Jesus; and as Spirit, God is inspirer of the prophets and apostles, but it is one and the same God who appears in these transitory and successive manifestations, just as a man may be at one moment father to his children, then boss to his employees and at another time citizen and taxpayer before government.

Cyprian called the modalists Patripassians (Father-suffering) because they seemed to make the Father the one who was crucified. And Tertullian said of Praxeas (c.200), another famous modalist, that he put to flight the Holy Spirit and crucified the Father.

Logos Christology

This Christology derives its name from the Gospel of John. In chapter 1 the author speaks about the Word (*Logos* in Greek), who in the beginning was with God and was God and through whom all things came to be. It was this Word who became flesh in Jesus. This Christology surpasses pre-existence Christology in that it not only affirms that the Word was pre-existent but was also co-eternal with God and was none other than God.

Though it is only in the prologue of John's Gospel that this Christology is stated quite unambiguously, there are also passages in the letters of St Paul which come very close to it, though in different terms. 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 has already been mentioned. Another very significant passage is Philippians 2:5-11, which speaks of Christ as being 'in the form of God' yet emptying himself to take the form of a slave and be born in human form.

The battle of the Christologies

Each of the Christologies had its supporters and opponents. The second and third centuries C.E. witnessed a constant battle between the supporters of the respective Christologies. Though none of them has ever been without some support, adoptionist Christologies soon fell from serious contention. Pre-existence Christology and Logos Christology tended to coalesce and make common cause against Modalism. Only when the latter was defeated and in retreat did they turn on each other to sort out their differences.

Looking back on these controversies, we are apt to regard some parties as the bad guys and others as the good guys, but it is important to recognise that all parties had the same aim, to answer

the question - what are we to make of Christ in the light of the apostolic testimony and our own experience, and how are we to understand the nature of God with respect to that answer?

All of the parties contributed something ultimately to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, even though the Modalists were ultimately branded heretics, their identification of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as successive modes of the one God implied an equality which ultimately supplanted the subordination of the Spirit to the Son and the Son to the Father which was characteristic of the Logos Christology in its early stages.

Terms used in the debate

Before we come to the greatest clash of all, we need to look at some of the terms being used in the discussion because they contributed to the confusion at the time and ever since.

Tertullian (160-220) is usually credited with supplying the terms used in the Latin-speaking part of the empire. He used the terms *substantia* (substance, literally that which stands under) and *persona* (person). God was said to be one substance but there was one person of the Father and another of the Son. As we shall see, the term *substantia* was especially confusing at the time when compared with terms used in the Greek-speaking part of the empire.

The terms are confusing today because their meaning for us is vastly different from what their meaning was for Tertullian. For us, substance means something fairly solid. It was C. S. Lewis, I believe, who tells that as a child he asked his mother after prayers one night what was meant by the Holy Trinity. She replied that it meant that God was three persons in one substance. Lying in bed he tried to think the matter through. The only substance he could think of was tapioca pudding. The image of three persons in a huge tapioca pudding seemed to his childish mind to be a very strange picture of God!

For most people, however, it is the term *persona* that is most misleading. *Persona* could mean a mask used in a play to indicate the character being represented, or the character itself, or the player who was acting the character, but whatever Tertullian had in mind, he certainly did not think of a *persona* as a person in the modern sense of the term, that is as an individual centre of self-consciousness. Yet that its how we understand it when he hear the word person today.

In the Greek-speaking world, the North African scholar, Origen (185-254), is credited with supplying the terms *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (usually translated as subsistence). Father and Son were said to be two *hypostases* in the one divine essence. *Hypostasis* has the advantage of not introducing to us the misleading characteristics

associated with person, but it has the disadvantage of having no positive associations at all. In the ancient world, it introduced a serious confusion. It is virtually an exact translation of *substantia* yet where Tertullian applied *substantia* to the unity of God, *hypostasis* was applied to the differentiations of Father and Son.

The fourth century and beyond

The next stage in the process leading to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was the Arian controversy. This was basically a Christological dispute, but it had great significance for the doctrine of God.

The Arian controversy

Arius was a presbyter in the archdiocese of Alexandria. During the final persecution in Alexandria before the accession of Constantine, he had joined a schismatic sect but when the persecution ended and the Archbishop, who had been imprisoned, returned to his diocese, Arius left the sect and returned to the church. In their bitterness over his desertion, the sect members accused Arius to the Archbishop of teaching heresy. Rather than becoming more cautious, Arius taught his views even more boldly, even setting his teaching to saloon tunes of his day.

Arius was genuinely concerned about the uniqueness and unchangeableness of God which he thought were imperilled by speaking of the *Logos* as being co-eternal with God and of the same nature or essence as God. So he taught that the Son was pre-existent but not co-eternal with God, who has no equal.

Arius believed that the Son was generated by the Father and was the first born of all creation. His slogan was: 'There was (a time) when he was not'. He held that the Son was brought into being by God for the purpose of creating the world. Though he had pre-eminence over all creatures, he was like them in being a creature and mutable (changeable). To the Son, as to all creatures, the Father is invisible. He only sees the Father by a special power granted from God, namely the Holy Spirit. To be sure, in Arius' thought there was a divine triad, but they were unequal in glory and different in their essences.

Alexander, the Archbishop of Alexandria, found Arius guilty of teaching heresy and dismissed him. Arius then travelled around finding supporters and making counter accusations against Alexander. He found his staunchest ally in Eusebius, the Bishop of Nicomedia.

Before long, the whole of the eastern church was in turmoil over the dispute. Constantine, who had now seized power using the sign of Christ and whose dream it was to unify the whole

empire under his rule, was dismayed to find that the religion which he had befriended was now looking like splitting the empire he was trying to unify, in a quite new way.

Constantine decided, therefore, to intervene directly in the dispute. When his first efforts proved counter-productive, he determined to call together an ecumenical council to resolve the issue. The site chosen for the council was Nicea in Bithynia, selected for its fine climate and the good omen of its name (Victory). The council was convened in May 325 with the Emperor himself in the chair.

His aim was to achieve unity rather than any particular theological outcome. The Emperor had little patience with the niceties of theological disputes. The negotiations were long and arduous yet agreement seemed impossible to achieve. Finally, the creed of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea was made the basis of a settlement, but apparently on the initiative of the Emperor himself, there was added to the creed the statement that the Son is *homoousios* (of the same essence) with the Father.

The decision was more or less imposed on the assembly. Since it was the Emperor's proposal, only Arius and his closest supporters refused to sign, but it really pleased none of the contending parties. Though an equivalent had been used in the Latin part of the empire for some time, in the east the term was suspect. It did not please the Arians because it said the very opposite of what they wanted to say. It did not please Eusebius of Caesarea and the majority with him who held the middle ground because it was non biblical. Even the Alexandrians were suspicious of it because, although it ruled out Arius' teaching, it was capable of being understood in a modalist fashion.

The victory of Nicea

The story of Arianism's spread and the fluctuations of its fortune as emperors alternately embraced it and rejected it makes fascinating reading. Eventually, however, supporters of the Nicene statement, including the disputed term *homoousios*, gained the upper hand and their position was accepted throughout the eastern part of the empire as orthodoxy. That this happened was due largely to four people.

The first of these was Athanasius who, as deacon, accompanied his bishop, Alexander, to Nicea and who, soon after on the death of Alexander, succeeded him as Archbishop of Alexandria. He recognised that while *homoousios* (of the same essence) could be understood in a modalist fashion, it could also be understood in a manner which supported the Alexandrian theology. He gave his whole life to the defence of the Nicene solution, experiencing much persecution as a result. He also took up the question of the status

of the Holy Spirit and was the first to argue clearly and firmly that the Spirit was also *homoousios* with the Father and the Son.

The other three who were very influential in achieving this result were the so-called Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa - late 4th century) who cleared up some of the confusions that had existed and clarified the distinction between *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (subsistence).

They taught that in the triune God there is one *ousia* and three *hypostases*. Hence it was possible to say that the Son was of the same substance or essence as the Father and not fall into modalism so long as it was held that Father and Son were different *hypostases*. Implicit in this also was the very important affirmation that unity and threeness apply to the triune God in quite different respects. As W. N. Clark[4] has put it, 'no true doctrine of Trinity can mean that God is three in the same sense in which [God] is one'.

Opponents of the doctrine have often failed to understand this and have consequently regard it as either meaningless or absurd. That is certainly not what the doctrine says and the Cappadocians made that quite plain. However, supporters and opponents of the doctrine alike must understand that this means that the triune God cannot be both three persons and one person. God's oneness and God's threeness cannot both be located in the area of personhood.

Perichoresis

It would be beyond the scope of this book to outline all the developments in the understanding of the doctrine, but there is one further important constructive contribution which we need to note. This was made by John of Damascus (675-749).

He was still concerned that the unity of God was not clearly enough stated. The doctrine was still capable of being understood in such a way that God might be thought to be composed of three separate parts, like an egg, and that we might actually be able to have one part without the others. John therefore asserted the *perichoresis* or co-inherence of the persons. John found scriptural warrant for this in John 14:10 ('Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'). According to John the persons or *hypostases* are immanent in one another though without confusion or mixture.

The term *perichoresis* means a dancing around. The image it conjures up is that of the divine persons dancing together. It is this trinitarian dance which constitutes the unity of the three persons. As Moltmann has put it, 'By virtue of their eternal love [the divine Persons] live in one another to such an extent, and dwell in one another to such an extent, that they are one. It is a process of perfect and intense empathy'.'[5]

This notion has been widely adopted in Western Christianity. What it means is that however we meet God, whether as Father, Son or Holy Spirit, we do not meet with a part or fraction of God; rather we meet with God in all God's fullness and unity.

The meaning is illustrated and clarified by an example used by Luther and repeated by Karl Barth. In the story of the baptism of Jesus, we call the one that appears in the form of a dove, not Father or Son but Holy Spirit, the voice from heaven not the voice of the Son or the Holy Spirit but of the Father, the man baptised in Jordan, not the incarnate Father or Holy Spirit but Son, but without forgetting or denying that everything, voice, gift from above, and the Incarnate is the work of the one God, Father, Son and Spirit.

Intra-Trinitarian relationships

We have passed over St Augustine and others who speculated about the intra-trinitarian relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though this is an area of trinitarian theology which some theologians treat at great length. If there is a threeness within the very being of God, clearly it is possible to speculate about the relationships between the three, just as it is possible to inquire about the relationship between body, mind and spirit in a human being.[6]

As humans, we are not in a very good position to inquire into the inner life of God; so we must be cautious and not rush in where angels fear to tread. However, following the few scriptural clues we have, we may speak cautiously, with the tradition, of the Father as Source or Origin of the divine life, and of the Word and Spirit as being from, but eternally related to that Source. The relationship of the Spirit to the Son, which was the theological factor in one major split in the church, we shall look at more fully in the chapter on the Holy Spirit.

Understanding the doctrine today

The one and the three

It was said at the beginning that the doctrine of the Trinity has nothing to do with some heavenly mathematics in which three equal one. Nevertheless, the problem of the three and the one still bothers people and leads many to dismiss the doctrine as incomprehensible. So something needs to be said about it.

When we say that God is one or a unity, we mean that in one of two senses. First, we mean that you need only one finger to count all the gods there are. There is but one God. In Christianity, polytheism is unambiguously ruled out. As Walter Kasper has reminded us in the words of Tertullian, 'If God is not one, then there is no God'.[7] If there are several gods, none of them is God.

This is not a matter of Christian exclusiveness. Indeed, to the contrary, it is precisely as the one and only God that God can be the Lord of all nations and races.

Having said that, however, we have to take note of the fact that there is a lot more to be said of God than that. Nothing consists in being a single digit. Here Leonard Hodgson's distinction between mathematical unity and organic unity is helpful.[8] The former is simple arithmetical unity, a matter of counting. Here one cannot be three or vice versa.

But this kind of unity is a theoretical abstraction, a construct of the mind. How many computers have I in my study? Count them! There is one. But that says nothing about the way it is made up, the mini-tower, the keyboard, the V.D.U., the cables running from one to the other, let alone the number of disk drives and all the electronic gismos inside. We have simply agreed in our minds that for purposes of counting we shall say that all of that constitutes one computer. And what about the printer? Shall we just take that with the computer or shall we say that there is one computer and one printer?

Organic unity is a unity constituted by its parts. Practically every existing thing that is countable is also an organic unity-galaxies, people, microbes and hydrogen atoms. Remove one or more of their parts and they would change - perhaps into something entirely different. If this is the case, then why should we imagine that God can only be spoken of in terms of mathematical unity? If God is more than a single electrical charge, there must surely be to God a rich inner being at least as complex as a human mind with corresponding distinctions. And may there not be a characteristic threeness about that inner being?

We may also speak of the unity of God in a second way. Unity also signifies a lack of opposition and antagonistic division. To affirm the unity of God is to affirm that there is not such opposition in God. God is not tugged one way by hormones and another by conscience as we often are. God is not a battle field in which good and evil tendencies fight for control. Rather, God is a unity in the sense of being of one mind and nature. All that is of God is unified in God's being. Of course we cannot know that in the way a psychiatrist may come to discover such things about us. It is a faith conviction which we come to on the basis of what we know of God through God's revelation and God's saving action.

It may be objected that this does not fully resolve the problem of the one and the three because it appears that the one God is personal but God's unity is constituted by the three, each of whom is also a person. Does that not mean that three persons equal one person?

One person or three persons?

It must be admitted that there are Christians who seem to want to say something like that. Even Leonard Hodgson, just mentioned, speaks of the constituent elements in the Godhead as 'each fully personal in the modern sense of being intelligent, purposive centres of consciousness'.[9]

Such a view of the Trinity does pose great problems and the conclusion of Cyril Richardson seems inevitable when he protests, 'If there are three centres of consciousness in God, there are three Gods; and no matter in what way we try to state their unity - be it one of purpose, or of an intensive relationship of love, or of underlying essence - they are still three'.[10]

Unfortunately, it is true that Christians, even eminent theologians, seem to oscillate between tritheism on the one side and modalism or unitarianism on the other. If Hodgson seems to end up in tritheism, Richardson appears to choose modalism. But orthodox trinitarianism treads a careful path between the two and does not speak of God as both one person and three. This was precisely the point the Cappadocians were making. Unity applies to the *ousia* of God, threeness to the *hypostases*, and personhood cannot be postulated in the same sense of both.

Theologians have dealt with this problem in one of two ways. Noting that the translation of Tertullian's term, *persona*, as person has caused great confusion in trinitarian theology, some theologians have sought to achieve clarity by using other terms. Even St Augustine asked, 'Three what? Three persons - not because I want to say this, but because I may not remain silent'. St Anselm even spoke about 'three somethings-or-other (*tres nescio quid*)'.[11]

Karl Barth preferred to speak of 'three modes of being' as relatively better than 'persons' though he was aware that his use of this phase might lead people to think that he had returned to the old heretical doctrine of modalism as Sabellius had taught it.

However, the term does not necessarily imply modalism. The modalists taught that the modes of God's being were only temporary and an external appearance, without anything corresponding to them in the being of God. Barth insisted, on the contrary, that God's modes of being are neither temporary nor just an appearance but belong to the way God is eternally in Godself. They are essential to God's being as God. The notable Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, also preferred to speak in a similar way of three 'modes of subsistence'.

Other theologians have chosen to hold onto the concept of one God in three persons. However, to do that, they admit that we must rescue the concept of person from modern understandings

of it which emphasise individuality and separation from other individuals. This, they say, represents a fallen notion of personhood. True personhood is to be understood in terms of relations with other persons. In this sense, persons mutually constitute one another. The doctrine of the Trinity does not speak in terms of three individuals in one God; this would make the doctrine impossible. Rather it speaks of three persons in the sense just described.[12]

Catherine LaCugna, whose book, *God For Us*, has made a significant contribution to the understanding of God as triune, concludes that it does not matter much in which of these two ways we use the term person, singular or plural, of God. The essence of God in itself is bound to transcend all our language about it. But since person is the relational mode of being, the important thing is to hold onto the conviction of 'God's personal reality revealed in the face of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit'.

She concludes by saying, 'It does not so much matter whether we say God is one person in three modalities, or one nature in three persons, since these two assertions can be understood in approximately the same way. What matters is that we hold onto the assertion that God is personal, and that therefore the proper subject matter of the doctrine of the Trinity is the encounter between divine and human persons in the economy of redemption'.[13]

The doctrine's meaning for us

One of the best ways to understand the doctrine is to understand what it means, what it denies, what it affirms, what truths it seeks to protect and affirm and what benefits it offers to us.

Language about God

At the beginning of the chapter, it was said that the doctrine is about the grammar and vocabulary of Christian speech about God. Hopefully, that has begun to be made clear already and will become clearer still when we look at Christ and the Holy Spirit in later chapters.

Here it only needs to be added that the doctrine seeks to guide our language in such a way that we do not give the impression that there are three Gods, or that there is subordination and hierarchy in God, or that the revelation of God as Father, Son and Spirit can be understood in terms of modalism.

All Christians would agree that our faith is monotheistic and that polytheism is abhorrent to us. Unfortunately, our language sometimes conveys to others the impression that we are tritheists, and sometimes we even confuse ourselves. This can lead to unfortunate conclusions in many areas of doctrine. The doctrine

of the Trinity seeks to guard us from this confusion and to enable us to expound our faith clearly to others also.

The doctrine also rules out subordinationism. By speaking of the divine Three as *homoousios* (of one essence, one in being), it denies that there are degrees of divinity in God. The Son and the Spirit are no less fully God than the Father. And even though the Son and the Spirit carry out the will of the Father in the economy of redemption in the world, there is no hierarchy in God. Therefore we cannot, amongst other things, justify hierarchies on earth as reflections of a supposed divine hierarchy.

Finally, the doctrine forbids us to speak in a way that would suggest modalism, because that would be to suggest that God gives the impression of differentiation and threeness in relation to human beings while in fact in Godself there is nothing corresponding to this appearance. It is a kind of deception and hence what we take to be revelation is not to be trusted.

The integrity of revelation

As suggested in the previous paragraph, part of what is at stake in the doctrine of the Trinity is the possibility and integrity of revelation. A British theologian, Norman Pittenger, has put it this way: 'three experiences had come to [people] from one God; therefore three sorts of relationship were possible with one God; therefore some corresponding distinctions must exist within God, who as ultimate truth does not reveal himself in any other guise than that which actually is of the essence of his being'.[14]

To put it another way, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God's gracious dealings with us in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit really do express what God is eternally in Godself. We may trust that God is as God represents Godself in revelation. We need not fear that there is a different and hidden God lurking behind the 'revealed' God. Indeed, if there were, revelation would not be revelation at all but a deception.

If that were the case, we would be in deep trouble. We would not be able to say anything about God at all with confidence. God might even make out in Christ to be a God of love but in fact be a fiend. Of course, we have no way of proving beyond question that God is as represented in 'revelation', any more than we can prove that other people are as they make themselves out to be. In both cases, we must judge for ourselves whether the revelation is genuine. However, faith means to us as Christians that we judge God to be faithful and true and in no way a deceiver.

It is in these terms also that we must reply to those people who say, 'I can agree that there must be a richness in God's being that may involve distinctions, but why necessarily three? Why not

seven, or fifteen or an infinite number?' The answer is that God does not represent Godself in revelation as a unity of seven or fifteen, but of three.

God has what it takes

As well as affirming the integrity of revelation, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself and that God really saves us though Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine affirms that God has what it takes to do this. It is not impossible because God's nature is such as to make it possible.

The loss of the doctrine of the Trinity always means that it is no longer possible to believe that God sent the only Son, being of God's own being, for our salvation. Instead, God just sent one more messenger, a heavenly being, perhaps, but not as the creed says, 'God from God, Light from Light'. While that might be a sign that God is very patient and persistent, it does not represent the astonishing love of the God who gave a beloved Son, and in God's own self bore the cost and pain of our redemption.

Unitarians often represent the triune God as too small, too neatly packaged. In fact, it is the other way around; it is the unitarian God who is too small and limited. It is that God who does not have what it takes to make either incarnation or redemption possible.

In the end, such a God ends up being locked outside the created universe, unable to break through, for lack of what is required to do so.

Only the triune God has the capacity to be both the transcendent creator of all and the immanent saviour of all. The truth is beautifully expressed in the hymn of the Unitarian, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote more truly than he believed:

Lord of all being, throned afar,
Thy glory flames from sun and star;
Centre and soul of every sphere,
Yet to each loving heart how near.[15]

When the chips are down, only the God who is revealed in Christ through the Spirit and is worshipped as the Holy Trinity seems able to undergird that truth and assure us that in fact God is love.

Trinitarian religion

It is probably unreasonable to expect that most Christians will have a firm grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity and be able to explain it, though those who lead the Christian community in worship and proclamation should have such a grasp. Yet even those who have a less than perfect grasp of the doctrine may have a faith and worship that is genuinely trinitarian.

Trinitarian religion does not require that we drop the right name at the right place or that we address all three *hypostases* equally in our prayers. Our religion will be genuinely trinitarian if it acknowledges that God was in Christ to redeem us, that God is present to us as Spirit to justify, sanctify and equip us, and that, through Christ, the Spirit lifts us into the presence of the Father.

Three unitarianisms

A genuinely trinitarian religion will protect us from the dangers of the three possible unitarianisms. The most common unitarianism is that of the first person of the Trinity. This leads to an undermining of the gospel of salvation and ultimately to deism and deistic humanism. This can be seen in parts of the Unitarian movement where the trinitarian understanding of God has been deliberately abandoned.

Unitarianisms of the Son and the Spirit rarely occur because of deliberate choice; rather they occur unintentionally, but their results are none the less serious.

Unitarianism of the Son leads to authoritarianism. Because Christ is no longer immediately accessible to us, the records of the life and teachings of Jesus, and the Scriptures generally are turned into fixed and eternal decrees. The authority which rightly belongs to the Spirit is usurped by those who claim to be the rightful interpreters of the records, who then call for acceptance of their interpretation in an authoritarian manner.

Unitarianism of the Spirit leads to what was called in earlier times enthusiasm. Today that term means ardent zeal and is rightly regarded as a virtue, but when the word was applied, for example, to John Wesley as a term of abuse, it meant the kind of thing we might express with a phrase like having a hot line to God.

Where people believe they have this kind of arrangement with the Lord, they feel free to by-pass Word and sacraments, to neglect the accumulated wisdom of the people of God and to treat their own inner convictions as God's latest Word. It then becomes impossible to distinguish the guidance of God from the most irrational whim, and the Word of God from personal opinion. The Jonestown disaster, in which almost the whole community died by self-administered poison, is a horrifying example of the tragedy to which this aberration can lead.

Feminism and the doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a favourite of feminists. It has come under fire from Christian feminists and others quite frequently. In fact as long ago as 1881, an early feminist, Matilda Gage, wrote: 'All the evils that have resulted from the dignifying

of one sex and degrading the other may be traced to this central error: a belief in a trinity of male Gods in One, from which the feminine element is wholly eliminated'.[16] There are, however, some feminists who hold staunchly to the doctrine. One of these is Catherine LaCugna, from whose book we have quoted, and there are others.

Some feminists criticise the doctrine because they assume an implied subordination of Spirit to Son and Son to Father. They see this as the tip of a pyramid of hierarchy which reaches down to men, women, animals, plants and inanimate things. So they see it as justifying the oppression of women by men.

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is, however, completely opposed to subordinationism and hierarchy. Indeed Patricia Wilson-Kastner expounds the doctrine in a manner which is quite unsympathetic to patriarchy.[17] She even asserts that 'as a theological notion, the Trinity is more supportive of feminist values than is a strict monotheism'. In agreement with her, I would argue that the doctrine of the Trinity in its substance should not cause any problems for feminism.

The language in which it is expressed in another matter. By the use of two masculine terms, Father and Son, without any female terms, the language of the doctrine seems to suggest that the Trinity is exclusively masculine and that the feminine is totally excluded from God. We may protest that the language is only metaphorical and is not meant to imply sexuality or gender in God but this is not convincing to feminists.

They would argue that when such terms are used in public, the intention cannot always be explained and is not communicated by the terms themselves What is communicated is the common meaning of the terms, which includes masculinity. What is more, when two terms such as God and Father are put together, this affects the perception of each, so that not only is God perceived as masculine, but human fathers are perceived as godlike.

All language has difficulties when used of God. Whatever words we use are drawn from the world of people, animals and things and will not fit snugly when used of God. Aspects of the analogy have to be negated. When we call God Father, not only do we have to negate the suggestion that God is male, but we also need to negate the implication that God has begotten an offspring by union with a female, and that before the generation of the offspring, God was single and not yet a father.

The range of options we have to draw on in English also is limited. Whatever terms and pronouns we use will either be masculine, feminine, or neuter. To substitute feminine terms for masculine is no advance. To call the deity Goddess is to assert

sexuality and gender of God even more emphatically. To use neuter terms is to give the impression that God is impersonal.

Not all languages have the difficulties that English has. In Indonesian and Malay, for example, pronouns have no gender and even the word for Son has no gender but is like child in English, though without the unfortunate implication of child that the one referred to is not yet mature. It would be interesting to discover whether Indonesians are therefore less sexist than English-speakers.

One alternative in English is not to use pronouns of God at all but to replace them with God, God's and Godself, which is the practice that has been followed in this book. In discussing the doctrine, we might agree to use alternative designations, such as God the Source, God the Word and God the Spirit. Source is the English equivalent of the ancient designation of the Father as *fons et origo*, though it is a pity it is so easily mistaken for sauce. In addition to Word (*Logos*), there is also biblical precedent for designating the Son as Sophia (Wisdom). We could therefore refer to the Three as Source, Sophia and Spirit.

Some people attempt to get around the difficulty by referring to God as 'Creator, Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit'. The problem with this language is that it is not trinitarian. It simply names three activities of God and is perfectly compatible with a non-trinitarian monotheism. There is nothing wrong with such language as long as it is not thought to be trinitarian. Therefore it should not be used where a trinitarian formula is required. There is no point in having a *gloria* after the psalm unless it is trinitarian. The baptismal formula also needs to be trinitarian and this is a really difficult issue for some feminists.

The baptismal formula

Some are urging a return to the early New Testament formula of baptism in the name of Jesus (for example Acts 19:5). Getting the church universally to agree to that would be difficult and without very wide agreement, the suggestion is doomed.

Ruth C. Duck suggests replacing the trinitarian formula with three questions: 'Do you believe in God, the Source, the fountain of life? Do you believe in Christ, the offspring of God, embodied in Jesus of Nazareth and in the church? Do you believe in the liberating Spirit of God, the wellspring of new life?'[18] This suggestion is also unsatisfactory for numerous reasons but chiefly because a set of questions cannot replace a declaratory statement.

James F. Kay, who is now Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary, when he was at Riverside Church in New York city, introduced the formula, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all'.[19]

He believes that this augmented formula preserves a genuine trinitarianism, protects the ecumenical validity of the baptisms and meets the feminist requirement that the feminine aspects of the character of God be recognised.

No solution to the problem has unanimous acceptance. The important thing is that we should go on experimenting with options and perhaps in time we shall arrive at a way of speaking which both sounds well and overcomes the offence of the present language.

In the meantime, some of the offence would be removed if we used more feminine metaphors to and about God, and if we reserved the use of the designation Father for those occasions when we wish to identify or address the first person of the Holy Trinity rather than using it indiscriminately of the first person and of the triune God as a whole.

Notes

[1] E. Brunner: *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Lutterworth Press, 1949, p. 220.
[2] In somewhat different terms, this point was made by C. F. D. Moule in his article "The New Testament and the Trinity" in the *Expository Times* Vol. 88, No. 1, p. 17. Other examples of binitarian formulae will be found in John 1:1-14; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:10 ff; 2 Timothy 4:1.
[3] Many other similar passages could be cited. See, for example, J. N. D. Kelly: *Early Christian Creeds*, Longmans, 1960, p. 23.
[4] W. N. Clark: *Outline of Christian Theology*, T. & T. Clark, 1948, p. 170.
[5] J. Moltmann: *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, Harper & Row, 1981, pp. 174-5.
[6] For the sake of completeness, the terms Economic Trinity and Immanent Trinity should be mentioned. The former refers to the outward manifestations of God's being as trinity, the trinity of revelation and action in the world. It is only through this that we can know anything about the Immanent Trinity which is the trinity of God's inner being.
[7] W. Kasper: *The God of Jesus Christ*, S.C.M. Press, 1984, pp. 239f.
[8] L. Hodgson: *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Nisbet, 1943, Lecture IV.
[9] L. Hodgson: *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 141.
[10] C. Richardson: *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Abingdon, 1958, p. 94.
[11] W. Kasper: *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 286.
[12] See, for example, W. Kasper: *The God of Jesus Christ*, p. 285, and C. Gunton: *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T. & T. Clark, 1991, pp. 10f.
[13] Catherine Mowry LaCugna: *God for Us - The Trinity and Christian Life*, Harper Collins, 1991, p. 305.
[14] N. Pittenger: *Christ and the Christian Faith*, Round Table, 1941, p. 134
[15] *The Methodist Hymn-Book for Use in Australasia and New Zealand*, 1933, number 32.
[16] Quoted by C. M. LaCugna: *God For Us*, p. 268.
[17] P. Wilson-Kastner: *Faith, Feminism and the Christ*, Fortress, 1983, pp. 122ff.
[18] Ruth C Duck: *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula*, Pilgrim Press, 1991.
[19] James F. Kay: 'In Whose Name? Feminism and the Trinitarian Baptismal Formula', in *Theology Today*, January 1993.

5

The nature and reality of God

In the previous chapter, we attempted to grasp the Christian understanding of God as a Trinity. Now we need to go further and try to understand the nature and character of this triune God. And in doing that we shall have to keep before us constantly the question of what light God's being as Trinity has to shed on the subject of God's nature.

Later in the chapter, we shall have to take note of the fact that for many people the prior question is whether there is any god at all, triune or otherwise. Indeed it is possible that we may ourselves have doubts about God's existence. It is quite normal for Christian people to have doubts. Since faith is a conviction which is something less than sure knowledge, doubt is always a possibility.

Somewhere in his writings, C. S. Lewis confessed that he was often assailed by doubt, but he was somewhat comforted by the remembrance that when he was an atheist earlier in his life, he was constantly assailed with the doubt in respect to his atheism that God might just be a reality. On such an ultimate question, whatever conviction we come to, doubt may still persist.

In relation to the problem of doubt and unbelief, Christians are in a difficult position. We would love to produce a convincing argument to deal decisively with these matters but no really valid argument seems to be available.

In addition to that embarrassment, there remains the uneasy feeling that if we could provide a proof, doubt might be overcome, but faith could be destroyed in the process, since it is precisely the fact that people cannot prove God's existence which makes faith both a necessity and a possibility.

Hans Kung has put the dilemma in this way:

Either belief in God can be proved and how is it then faith? Or it cannot be proved and how is it then reasonable? This is the perennial dilemma between reason and faith, particularly in the question of the knowledge of God, which some solve in favour of faith and the others in favour of reason - or even do not solve it at all.[1]

What is more, if God's existence could be proved and God's nature described in the way we might try to prove the existence of the Loch Ness monster, and describe it, we would have turned God into another object amongst the multitude of objects accessible to us for our scrutiny. If we believe in God at all, we know God is not that.

The best we can do as believers, is to state what it is we see or experience which leads us to faith and what confirms that belief for us. With all the inadequacies of language and the limitations of our minds to conceptualise what we experience, we struggle to convey who God is for us. As always we seek help from the biblical literature.

The biblical understanding of God

The Bible neither asks nor answers the question, Does God exist? The reality of God is, for the biblical writers, the unquestioned presupposition of their life and thought. Their problem was not so much the denial of God's existence as the false affirmation of the existence of too many gods. The questions they ask are: Who is God? What is God's name? What does God require of me?

There is no description of God in the Bible either, because God can never be made the object of our scrutiny and description. God is always the subject who confronts us personally and to whom we must respond totally, and not just in an intellectualistic way. We can only dare to speak of God at all because God has revealed Godself to us. There is no attempt in the Bible to go behind that revelation by means of reason or philosophy.

Nevertheless the biblical authors did draw certain conclusions about God's nature from God's dealings with the people. These are never set forth in the Bible in a systematic way, but it is possible for us to gather together in a systematic way some of the most important attributes ascribed to God.

Biblical attributes of God

God is Spirit

The Bible makes it clear from the beginning that God's being utterly transcends our human being, which is so limited in space and time. In some places, the Bible speaks of God as though God were just a

super being like ourselves. It is said that God walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8). God came down to have a look at the tower which the people were building at Babel (Genesis 11:5).

This is referred to as anthropomorphism, that is thinking and speaking as though God's form were like that of a human being. Some parts of the Bible are more anthropomorphic than others. Whether those who spoke and wrote in this way really thought God was like a human is open to question. They were probably not so naive as some moderns take them to be.

On the whole, the Bible comes down strongly against representing God, or thinking of God, in any material form (Exodus 20:4). God is not a physical entity. But how do we state positively what God is? Some theologians have suggested that God is not a being, but is being itself, but it is hard to say what meaning such a statement has. In the tradition, the problem has been dealt with by saying that God is spirit.

There are two difficulties with this. First, the Bible itself seldom describes God in this way. It often speaks of the Spirit of God as the mysterious energy of God at work in the world, but only in John 4:24 is it said that God is spirit, though this is also implied in Isaiah 31:3.

Secondly, it is not easy to say precisely what spirit means. In spite of these difficulties, we dare to sum up some of the most basic affirmations of the Bible about God by saying God is spirit.

Far from being a disadvantage, it is appropriate that we cannot say precisely what spirit is, because, in the first place, to say that God is spirit is to affirm that God defies delineation. Just as God cannot be captured in a drawing or a sculpture, neither can God be defined in words. The second of the Ten Commandments, forbidding the making of images and idols, applies as much to theologians with their clever definitions to encapsulate God as it does to wood carvers and goldsmiths. Spirit (*pneuma* - wind) is mysterious, invisible and beyond our control (John 3:8). So is God and we must not forget it.

In both Hebrew and Greek, spirit is connected with notions of breath and wind. Thus spirit is essential to life. The Psalmist wrote, 'When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created' (Psalm 104:29-30). Spirit is essential to life. It alone preserves the livingness of all things, and in that sense may be called being itself. To refer to God as spirit is to confess that God is the source of all life.

Spirit also reminds us of the New Testament antithesis between spirit and flesh. The latter stands not simply for physical being, but for the realm of the human in all its imperfections and

limitations. God utterly transcends this realm. 'I am God, not mortal' (Hosea 11:9). 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord' (Isaiah 55:8). It is often difficult for us to recognise that God's nature is not limited to the dimensions of ours, that God's forgiveness is not restricted to the size of ours, that God's justice is not so narrow as ours and God's faithfulness not so short-lived as ours.

God is personal

The personal nature of God is very strongly conveyed in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. It is for the sake of emphasising this that the Hebrew Scriptures especially dare to be anthropomorphic. What is essential to this way of speaking about God is its affirmation that God is not less living and active than humans are and that God possesses intelligence, will and something comparable to feeling in humans.

God's personality is further expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures by the fact that God has a name. In English, we cannot do justice to God's name. We simply take the common noun, god, spell it with a capital G and press it into service as a name.

In Hebrew, God's name is expressed in the four consonants YHWH. Originally, vowels were not written in Hebrew, and when eventually a system was devised for supplying vowels to the text, the pronunciation of the divine name had already been lost. We cannot be absolutely sure now how it was pronounced, but Yahweh is likely to be a closer approximation than Jehovah. However, we need to be careful about the use of the name because it is offensive to Jews for us to try to do so.

The important thing for us to note, however, is that God has a personal name, representing the unique personal nature of God, just as each human being has his or her own name, representing a unique personal character.

In the New Testament, God's personal nature is further demonstrated by Jesus' use of the term Abba (Papa) and by the fact that the Christ is referred to as Son. The doctrine of the Trinity may have difficulty in determining precisely where to locate personhood in God, but it never questions the fact that God is at least as personal as humans are.

God is one

Originally, Yahweh was regarded as Israel's God, while for other nations there were other gods. Whether Yahweh was the greatest god was even a matter of uncertainty in Israel at times. The prophets had to fight a relentless battle against the adoption of other gods alongside or instead of Yahweh.

In theory, the defeat of Israel by other nations should have suggested that the gods of the victorious nations were more powerful, yet it was precisely in the period of greatest national eclipse, at the time of the Exile, that the clear conviction emerged that Yahweh was not only the greatest of the gods, but indeed the only God and the Lord of all the nations (Jeremiah 10:1-16; Isaiah 43:10-11 & 44:8).

God is creator

It was a part of the development just mentioned that Yahweh was recognised to be the Creator of the whole earth and all that is in it. Some of the finest expressions of this faith are found in that portion of the Book of Isaiah which was written during the Exile (Isaiah 40-55). The author refers to the Lord as the One 'who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it' (Isaiah 42:5). Since this subject is to be taken up more fully in the next chapter, we shall leave further exploration of the theme until then.

God is almighty

That God is almighty is declared in Scripture. This appears to have been the original meaning of the title El Shaddai (Genesis 17:1; Job 13:3; Ezekiel 1:24). It is also confessed in the Nicene creed: 'I believe in God, the Father almighty ...' If God is creator of all that is and Lord of all people, it follows that nothing can ultimately stand against God or defeat God. God's will shall be done.

This is not to say that God can do anything we can put into words, like making a round square. Nor can God do that which is contrary to God's nature, such as commit sin, since this would be to go against God's own will. To say that God is almighty is to affirm that God has all the power necessary to accomplish the divine will in the long run.

Sometimes we substitute the word omnipotent (all-powerful) for almighty. It is a more philosophical term but the meaning is the same. In the next chapter, we shall look further at what it means and does not mean.

God is holy

In modern usage, the word holy suggests purity and moral uprightness. This was not its original meaning in Hebrew. The precise meaning of the Semitic root from which the term is derived is still debated, but it probably meant something like separated or set-apart. According to Hosea, God says, 'I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst' (11:9). Hosea here stresses the

otherness and inaccessible majesty of God, yet at the same time stresses the nearness of God to the people.

Were God simply separate and distant, we could ignore God. It is the fact that God is the wholly other in the midst that poses a problem for us. We can neither ignore God since God is present with us, nor can we treat God with familiarity because God is the utterly majestic and awesome One. We can only stand in God's presence with profound awe and reverence. Isaiah communicates very well the sense of being in the presence of the Holy One with the immediate consciousness of unworthiness and need for cleansing which that presence engenders (Isaiah 6:5).

As Israel's history progressed, the idea of God's holiness developed in two directions. On the one hand, the emphasis on the divine separateness intensified. Even the name of God came to be regarded as too holy to be pronounced by the lips of ordinary people. When the name was met in the text of Scripture, no attempt was made to say it, lest the name be defiled by unclean lips. The word LORD was substituted for it as it still is in most English translations. God was thought to be so holy that it was even unthinkable that ordinary people should have direct access to the Holy One. Specially set-apart intermediaries were required as go-betweens. For this reason, the role of priests grew in importance.

Jesus called a halt to this trend (and made himself very unpopular in doing so) by his insistence that God is like a father who may be approached directly by his children without the need of special intermediaries. (Though it should not be overlooked that even in the teaching of Jesus, God is the heavenly King, whose name is to be kept holy.)

At the same time, God's holiness was increasingly understood in terms of moral goodness. This development is demonstrated by the prophet Isaiah who wrote, 'the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness' (Isaiah 5:16). The connection between God's holiness and the moral action required of those who worship God is clearly stated in Leviticus 19:1-17.

God is righteous

This statement implies that God is not capricious and that there is no evil in God. God is morally good and looks for a similar goodness in those who worship God. However, it is possible to understand the righteousness of God too legalistically. Luther confessed that in the earlier part of his life he dreaded the phrase, 'the righteousness of God' because he understood it as requiring the punishment of the evil-doer for every sin committed. Luther's life was completely changed when, through his study of Scripture, he came to the conclusion that it is precisely the righteousness of God that leads to the justification of the sinner.

It was particularly Paul's use of the phrase in Romans which produced this change in Luther's understanding. Careful recent scholarship[2] has confirmed that when Paul uses this phrase in Romans he meant by it God's faithfulness and truth expressed in the establishment of a covenant relationship with the chosen people and God's adherence to that promise even when those people are unfaithful.

There is therefore no conflict between God's righteousness and God's love. It is precisely because God is righteous that God is also gracious and loving. It is the salvation of sinful people, not their punishment, that demonstrates the operation of God's righteousness. This is demonstrated for us in the gift of God's only Son.

God is love

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God's loving-kindness is declared and celebrated. The Psalmist declares, 'As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him' (Psalm 103:11).

In the New Testament, we are told that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). This rather unusual statement says something important about God. John might have said simply that 'God loves', or more naturally 'God is loving'. In that case, loving could have been understood as just one of God's activities alongside many others, such as God creates, God rules, God judges, God punishes and God takes vengeance. But by saying God is love, John implies that all God's activity is loving. When God creates, it is in love; if God rules, it is in love; if God judges, it is in love; and whatever cannot be done in love God does not do.

The love of God is represented in Scripture in many ways, for example, in God's care not only for people, but for sparrows and even the lilies in the paddock. God's love for the sinner is depicted in the parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes looking for the one that is lost. Nowhere is the love of God better demonstrated than in the gift of God's Son, which is nothing less than the gift of God's own self. It is supremely in the cross that God's love is manifest. 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).[3]

The influence of philosophy

Christian thought was influenced not only by the Bible but increasingly also by Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism and Neoplatonism first of all, and then later by Aristotelianism. The effect of this was to raise the respect of Christian theologians for reason and philosophy, and to raise hopes that God might be understood by the exercise of reason rather than depending on

revelation. It was even hoped that God's existence might be proved by rational argument.

Philosophical language applied to God

Greek ways of thinking, though in themselves noble and not to be despised, introduced into the Christian understanding of God terms very different from the biblical ones. They were much more impersonal. God was spoken of as the First Cause, the One, the Good and was described as infinite, immortal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. In these terms, God sounds more like a what than a who.

Both the impersonal language of philosophy and the more personal language of the Bible have value as well as dangers. Whenever the use of personal terms is in danger of making God seem like a supersized human being, the philosophical terms can be a corrective. On the other hand, the constant use of impersonal philosophical terms can give the impression that God is cold and distant. When that happens, Christians will want to return to the warmer, personal, biblical characterisation of God.

Since many of the philosophical terms only have meaning when contrasted with the creation, we shall look at them more fully in the context of the doctrine of Creation.

Limitations of language

It needs to be recognised that all our language about God, whether derived from the Bible or from philosophy, will be inadequate and in some respects misleading. It is not simply that we are trying to press into theological service language that is derived from, and designed for expressing, our experience of the world of our sense, though that is true. The problem is also that we are trying to speak in the third person of one who always meets us as subject. That is to say, our language about God inevitably turns the One who is always a subject into an object, and that falsifies the situation.

The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, once wrote: 'Properly speaking, God cannot be expressed but only addressed'.[4] The same thing pertains to our speech about other people. When we speak about them, something of the reality of their being as subjects is lost. That we inevitably have to do this in order to speak of God does not alter the fact that something is lost.

Arguments for the existence of God

Many attempts have been made to prove God's existence by rational argument. Here we shall look at just four of these arguments, the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the teleological argument and the moral argument. The first of

these is a most intriguing argument which has teased the minds of philosophers for centuries. It was first formulated by St Anselm (1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, at the end of the 11th century, in his book, *Proslogion.*

Basically Anselm's argument is that because we have the idea of a perfect Being (God), that Being must exist. Anselm stated his argument in the form of an address, or prayer, to God.

The ontological argument

Here is the argument in Anselm's words:

> *We believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought. Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in his heart, there is no God' (Psalm 14:1)? But surely when this same Fool hears what I am speaking about namely, 'something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought', he understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his mind, even if he does not understand that it actually exists ... Even the Fool, then, is forced to agree that something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought exists in the mind, since he understands this when he hears it, and whatever is understood is in the mind. And surely this cannot exist in the mind alone. For if it exists solely in the mind even, it can be thought to exist in reality also, which is greater. If then that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists in the mind alone, this same that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought is that-than-which-a-greater-can-be-thought. But this is absolutely impossible. Therefore there is absolutely no doubt that something-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought exists both in the mind and in reality ... And You, Lord our God, are this being.*[5]

Intriguing though it is, the argument has a number of weaknesses, the two most basic of which are these: First, there is no way in which we can infer necessity of existence from necessity of thought. If we think of God in this way, we may have to think of God as existing, as the argument maintains, but this does not justify us in asserting that God does exist. Secondly, the argument moves quite arbitrarily from that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought to God. For these an other reasons the argument is not valid.

The cosmological argument

According to this argument, every effect must have a cause. Now the universe is a whole combination of effects. These all have their causes which are, in turn, effects of other causes, and so on in an infinite regression of effects and causes. An infinite regression which would be without beginning, however, is unthinkable, and

therefore we must postulate an ultimate uncaused cause as the beginning of the chain of causes and effects, and that is God.

The main objection to this argument is that an uncaused cause is as much outside the range of our experience as an infinite regression, and is really therefore just as unthinkable. Nevertheless, the argument relates to the question that persistently arises in our minds: Why is there something, and not nothing?

The teleological argument

This argument is often associated with the name of William Paley (1743-1805), who argued that if one came upon a watch for the first time, one would argue from the obvious design of the watch to the existence of an intelligent designer who was responsible for it. The universe exhibits enormous evidence of design, and therefore it is just as reasonable to infer from this an intelligent designer, namely God.

The problem with the argument is that the universe also exhibits disorder. The other side of the argument is the problem of evil, which we will need to look at in a later chapter. If there is a good and intelligent designer, how come there is so much pain and suffering in the world? So the argument by no means constitutes a logical proof, though it has a certain psychological strength.

A story is told about the famous British scientist, Sir Isaac Newton, who was a devout Christian all his life, which illustrates the psychological strength of the argument. Newton made a mechanical model of the solar system with the planets in their relative positions circling the sun. By looking at it, a person could tell at any time the position of all the planets relative to one another. One day, one of Newton's unbelieving friends visited him and seeing the model recognised instantly what it was. 'How marvellous!' he exclaimed. 'Who made it?' 'No one', Newton replied. 'We just had some balls, rods and gears lying about, and they got together, somehow, and this thing got going.'

The unbeliever immediately assumed that the mechanical model had a designer and maker but that which it modelled had no designer or maker. It just got going.

The anthropic principle

In recent years, a new version of the teleological argument has received some scientific support in association with what is often referred to as the anthropic principle. Nuclear research has enabled scientists to determine developments in the universe from about one-hundredth of a second after the singularity (popularly called the Big Bang). It is clear that the universe had to evolve along a

very narrow path if human beings were ever to exist. P. E. Hodgson gives the following examples:

> *In the early stages of cosmic evolution, the ratio of nucleons to photons, electrons and neutrinos must have been close to one to a thousand million. If that ratio had been slightly larger or slightly smaller there would have been no nuclei heavier than hydrogen, and so no carbon and no possibility of life.*
> *The universe is remarkably homogeneous on a large scale. If the nonhomogeneities had been larger the universe would long ago have collapsed into black holes, and yet if it had been any smaller there would have been no galaxies.*
> *If the force between two protons had been a few percent stronger, nearly all the matter in the universe would have burned to helium before the first galaxies started to condense.*

Hodgson says that many more examples could be given and he goes on to quote with approval some words of Freeman Dyson: 'As we look out into the universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked together for our benefit, it almost seems that the universe must in some sense have known that we are coming.'[6]

Even this new approach to the argument from design, as the teleological argument is sometimes called, is not able to prove God's existence. However, it raises the question of probability. How probable or improbable is God's existence. Some people at least see the probability as very high.[7]

The moral argument

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a German philosopher, rejected all the arguments current in his time. He maintained that, strictly speaking, the existence of God is not something we can know, though there may be grounds for believing it. He argued that the practical reason, as distinct from the pure reason, needs to postulate the existence of God. His argument runs as follows:

We know ourselves to be under obligation to bring about total or complete good, what Kant referred to as the *summum bonum*. This is a perfect state of affairs in which virtue and happiness are joined together in harmony. What is more, ought implies can. If we ought to do it, it must be possible. But in fact it is not possible for us. We can achieve virtue in ourselves but we cannot ensure the perfect state in which happiness and virtue are joined. Therefore, we must postulate a rational and moral being who has the power, hereafter if not here, to bring virtue and happiness into harmony.

This moral argument for the existence of God is beset with no fewer difficulties than the other arguments are. Can we really say that we know ourselves to be under an unconditional obligation? Many people would say they know no such thing. And even if we do feel under some moral obligation, it is surely not an obligation to realise what Kant refers to as the *summum bonum*. Many would say that we have no right at all to expect that virtue and happiness will go together in harmony.

There are other, possibly better, ways of stating the moral argument, but none of them is logically compelling. However, though the argument constitutes no valid proof, it does testify to a widespread feeling that we do live in a moral universe and that only a good God could create and sustain such a universe.

There are other arguments; for example, there is the argument from the universality of religion amongst the peoples of the world, but none is any better than those already mentioned.

Signals of transcendence

The sociologist, Peter Berger, speaks of signals of transcendence which he finds within the human situation. These are things within our natural reality that appear to point beyond that reality.[8] For him, these signals of transcendence include the human propensity for order, which arises, he believes, from a conviction about the underlying order of the universe, the universality of human play, pointing to timelessness and deathlessness, the universality of human hope, outrage at inhuman evil, and humour (reflecting the cosmic discrepancy of the imprisonment of the human spirit in the world).

Berger is not suggesting that these things prove God's existence. What he is saying is that they represent convictions that lie deeper than our conscious reasoning that there is a dimension of reality which goes beyond what we observe on the surface.

The value of the arguments

Though all these arguments and signals fail as proofs for the existence of God, they are not without point or value. For a start, they have a certain psychological value. They express convictions that are there within us, however we have come by them. Speaking particularly of the five arguments, or five ways of St Thomas Aquinas, E. L. Mascall has suggested that they should not really be thought of as five separate proofs of the existence of God, but rather as five ways of regarding the world in which we live and coming to the recognition that finite being is quite incapable of accounting for its own existence.

In any case, many Christians are not disturbed by lack of valid logical arguments for God's existence. To reject a friend's personal approach and set out to prove independently in some way his or her existence would be very odd behaviour, even and insult. Similarly to reject God's approach to us and discount God's revelation in Christ through the Holy Spirit and insist instead on proving God's existence by our own arguments would be scarcely any better than outright unbelief.

What is more, no argument could establish the reality of the triune God who is made known in Jesus Christ and revealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The God whose existence the foregoing arguments try to establish is only a poor shadow of the God of whom the Scriptures speak. A great First Cause of the universe might be a God whom we could worship, but as one philosopher remarked, such a God could also be a perfect stinker.[9]

There are many people who believe that God exists but this belief makes no more difference to them than their belief in the existence of the planet Pluto, and that may well be because the God in whom they believe is simply a First Cause or a Cosmic Designer. Only the living and loving God disclosed in Jesus and witnessed to in the Scriptures is capable of producing a real difference in our thinking and living. So whether there are proofs or no proofs, God's self revelation remains all-important.

To say that there are no valid proofs is not to say that belief in God is unreasonable or irrational. Some people have taken the lack of valid arguments for the existence of God as proof that God does not exist. This conclusion does not follow. A theistic view of total reality remains just as likely as any other view. No total view of reality is any more provable or probable. Whatever view people adopt, they will point to things that lead them to that view. Christians also have their evidences, their moments of revelation.

Ultimately belief in God, like its opposite, atheism, is a matter of decision in the face of some uncertainty, on the basis of what we see and how we read our experience. As Christians, we find our decision confirmed by the resolution of some of the most basic issues of life, such as why there is something and not nothing, whether reality has any meaning, why we are here and what our destiny is, why some things seem to deserve utter contempt while others call for admiration, and why hope springs eternal in the human breast.

In other words, faith is a daring venture, but it finds itself supported and justified along the way.

Notes

[1] H. Kung: *On Being a Christian*, Collins Fount Paperback, 1978, p. 64.

[2] Sam K. Williams: "The Righteousness of God in Romans", in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99/2.

[3] If we take seriously the biblical witness that God is love, we have a difficulty with the concept of the wrath of God. Relying heavily on the Old Testament rather than the New, many Christians have taken wrath as a personal attribute of God. But this would introduce a contradiction into the nature of God and we would have to say that the statement 'God is love' claims too much. God only loves sometimes and sometimes acts in wrath. The New Testament, however, never represents God as expressing anger or wrath. Wrath is a reality but it is impersonal. It describes a condition of humanity, not an attribute of God. It is a descriptive term for the consequences of sin working themselves out in society and in the lives of individuals. It belongs in the same category as death, curse and law. Luther was very clear about this. He always treated wrath as one of the tyrants defeated by Christ, never an attitude of God changed by satisfaction or propitiation. Nevertheless, it is God's wrath because God has established a moral universe in which sin is bound to have disastrous consequences. Wrath bears witness to the divine order which does inevitably judge and condemn the disorder of sin.

[4] This is John Baillie's interpretation of what Buber said. See J. Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, Oxford University Press, 1939. p. 221.

[5] M. J. Charlesworth: *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 117-119.

[6] P. E. Hodgson: "Maker of Heaven and Earth" in *The Month*, May 1985. For a fuller statement of this argument, see H. Montefiore: *The Probability of God*, S.C.M. Press, 1985.

[7] See the last chapter of the book referred to in the previous note.

[8] P. L. Berger: *A Rumor of Angels*, Doubleday, 1969, p. 6ff.

[9] H. D. Aitkin, quoted by J. Hick: *Arguments for the Existence of God*, Macmillan, 1970, p. 103.

6
Creator and creation

One of the most basic Christian convictions is that the God whom we know in Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things, and that the world we perceive with our senses (and that includes the universe observed by the aid of telescope and microscope) is God's creation.

In both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, this is one of the first things we confess: 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen'. So basic is this that it seems utterly right and fitting that the Bible should begin with Genesis 1 and the words: In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Though we take this for granted, the validity of this view is not, and has not always been, conceded. Marcion, arch-heretic of the second century, believed and taught that the Christian God was totally different from the Old Testament God who had created the world and who was to be overthrown by the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, in modern times it is increasingly affirmed that energy-matter is eternal. It has no creator and its arrangement in its present form is purely the result of the chance effects of inherent laws of matter.

Marcion's view was vigorously opposed by the church. Though it had appeal for many people of that age, it passed with time and is not likely to appeal to anyone today. However, the view that energy-matter is eternal and has no creator is espoused by many people at the present time, particularly amongst scientists and ordinary people deeply influenced by scientific findings and

theories. So we shall have to look at it in more detail later, since it is a flat denial of the Christian view.

What needs to be said at the outset is that both views are, in their different ways, faith statements. It is not a matter of Christians arguing on faith against a position which scientists adopt on the basis of knowledge. At stake are not scientifically provable facts but questions of ultimate meaning and value and these cannot be established in any scientific or law-court sense.

The biblical witness

Anyone who knows anything about the Bible knows that it begins with a statement about the creation of the world. Few people realise that the first chapters of Genesis are by no means the oldest parts of the Old Testament and that the oldest surviving credal statements do not speak of creation or God as creator at all. Rather, they concentrate on those mighty deeds in history by which God was made known and Israel was freed to be God's people. Covenant theology preceded creation theology.

When the Hebrew people did come to speak about creation, it was not because of any profound interest in the natural world or because they sought an answer to the question: how did the world come into being? Rather, it was because they were pursuing the historical question: How did history begin? Whence does the history of Israel derive its meaning? The answer was that history began with God's creation of the world and Israel's history is meaningful because the God who called and freed Israel was the same God who created all things.

Though there are creation motifs in the Old Testament which belong to an earlier era, the idea of Yahweh as creator of heaven and earth only came to full flower around the time of the Exile, in the days of Jeremiah and more especially the unknown prophet who wrote chapters 40-55 in the book of Isaiah. Apart from the Psalms, there are more references to creation in these chapters of Isaiah than in any other part of the Bible. See, for example, Isaiah 40:28-31; 42:5-7; 43:1-13; 44:24-26; 45:5-12; 51:15-16. Old Testament references to God's work in creation are too numerous to be listed in full, but the following are representative passages: Psalms 8:3-4; 24:1-2; 89:11-15; 90:1-2; 104; Jeremiah 31:35; Malachi 2:10; Job 38:4-11; Proverbs 8:22ff.

The New Testament does not speak so much about creation. Its theme is rather the new creation in Jesus Christ, but it assumes the Old Testament witness and builds upon it. However, some clear statements of the creation faith are found in the following passages: John 1:1-12; Acts 14:15; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2; 11:3; Revelation 4:11.

Creatio ex nihilo

In one important respect, the Christian doctrine of creation has traditionally gone beyond the clear witness of Scripture, namely in its assertion that God created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). This view of creation came into Christian theology very early. We find it expressed in the writing of Irenaeus around C.E.170. Though other views have been expressed, the theological consensus right through to our own time favours this view. It was certainly expressed very clearly in the *Institutes* of John Calvin[1] and it is reaffirmed by the majority of contemporary theologians.

On this matter, the Genesis account of creation is not absolutely clear. Genesis 1:1 in the *Revised Standard Version* could be understood to mean that the first step in creation was the creation of formless matter, presumably out of nothing. That presumption, however, is not clearly implied. What is more, many scholars prefer the *New English Bible* translation which renders the first verse as follows: When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void. This translation does not imply creation out of nothing but suggests that God's creative activity consisted in giving form to matter which previously existed in a formless and chaotic state.

We can be fairly sure that the author of Genesis1 knew and drew upon a Babylonian creation story which regarded both God and matter as eternal. It may well be that the author was deliberately trying to reshape that story in such a way as to eliminate the Babylonian dualism in favour of creation out of nothing. This may account for the uncertainty in the language.[2] However, we cannot be certain.

Dualism

Though there is a theological consensus favouring creation out of nothing, there are other views which have been held by Christians and which find at least an echo in the Bible. There is, first, the view already mentioned, that God created the universe out of chaotic, but already existing, matter. This would make God's creative activity very much like that of a sculptor who creates a beautiful statue out of a huge lump of irregularly shaped marble. Just as the sculptor does not first create the marble, so, it is said, God did not first create the formless matter. Matter is as eternal as God.

Such a view may be reflected in the first verse of Genesis and traces of it are surely to be found in other parts of the Old Testament. For example in Job 38:4-11, God's creative work is pictured in terms of setting bounds to the watery chaos of the sea thus making an orderly space in which life and history can take place.

Because this view holds that there are two eternal realities alongside each other, neither totally dependent on the other, it is known as dualism. Some religions have been decidedly dualistic. Two examples are Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia, and Gnosticism, which flourished in the Hellenistic world in the form of numerous sects in the early days of Christianity. Since some people, even some theologians, still advocate this view today, it is worth looking at some of its implications.

Some people prefer a dualistic view because it is in accord with numerous ancient world-views and because they feel it is more congruent with the modern scientific outlook. The value of the first point is debatable, as is the correctness of the second. Others believe that dualism provides a better explanation of the problem of evil.

It is precisely here that one of the problems with dualism lies. In a dualism of God and matter, it seems inevitable that the material world will be equated with evil, for if there are two eternal realities - God and matter - and two facts of experience - good and evil - and if it is affirmed that God is good, then matter becomes identified with evil. This has serious consequences for the way we view the world and live in it. For example, if matter is inherently evil, there is no point in trying to improve physical conditions, because the effort is bound to be futile.

Another consequence of this view is a world-denying asceticism, for if the world is evil, godly living would seem to require the denial of all that is physical. Occasionally, however, it gives rise to the opposite extreme, licentiousness, since, if matter is evil, one cannot really expect anything good of the body.

Another problem with dualism is that it undermines our hope for the future. If God has not created matter in the first place, and the world, therefore, is not totally dependent on God, what grounds have we for believing that in the end God will be able to accomplish the divine purpose for the universe? May it not be that in the end this eternally existing matter, in which evil seems to inhere, will prove more than a match for God?

An examination of the dualistic alternative helps us to see that the doctrine of creation out of nothing not only affirms the ultimacy of God alone, but it also affirms our faith in God's purpose and destiny for the world, and the fundamental goodness of the material world itself.

Other views of creation

Another view is that God created the world through conflict. There is a Babylonian epic, *Enuma Elish,* which tells the story of conflict between the deities Marduk and Tiamat. Eventually Marduk slays Tiamat and creates the world out of Tiamat's body. This view also is reflected in some poetical passages in the Old Testament such as

Isaiah 51:9-10. Here, creation is associated with the slaying of the great dragon, Rahab.

It is not suggested that the author seriously thought creation came about in this way. It is more likely that he was making use of a popular myth in the same way that modern poets do this, though without suggesting that they take the myths literally. Such a view assumes an original polytheism and taints the material world with the evil stain of God's enemy.

Yet another view is that God created the world out of Godself. Closely related to this is the view that the world emanates from God in somewhat the same manner as light emanates from the sun. In such views, there is a very close relationship between God and the world, even to the extent that the world itself is divinised.

The British theologian John Macquarrie has expressed interest in such a view of creation. He believes this view would help promote a more responsible attitude to the world and a more careful use of its resources.[3] However, there is a serious question as to whether such views permit any real freedom and independence to the creation.

The views referred to above do not exhaust the possibilities but they are the main alternatives. Though the Bible does not explicitly require a doctrine of creation out of nothing, it is fair to say that such a doctrine harmonises best with some of the most basic elements of biblical religion. It alone does justice to the radical monotheism which developed at the time of the Exile and which we find in the New Testament. It alone fits with the biblical emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the affirmation that the material world is good.

The doctrine of creation and scientific views

There is no area in which the clash between religion and science has been sharper than over the understanding of creation. This is a great pity because the clash is unnecessary. The doctrine of creation out of nothing is not a scientific statement. It is not meant to be. It is a statement of faith. It does not purport to state how things are related in space and time, but to make a statement about the status of the material world and the nature of God. Later we shall be drawing out the implications of that statement, but first let us look more closely at the relationship between the Christian doctrine of creation and scientific accounts of how the world developed.

If we understand the nature and function of both doctrine and scientific statements correctly, there is really no clash between them. Science is concerned to explain the world as it finds it, and hence looks for the immediate causes of the present state of affairs. When these have been discovered, it looks for the factors which produced

these causes, and so it moves back step by step towards the ultimate origin of things, but the ultimate itself is not really within the grasp of science. The scientist is prepared to begin with big bang, or some such thing, as the bedrock on which all else is built.

One scientist on an Australian radio program concluded his speech in this fashion: 'There is still some uncertainty about this originating event, but whatever may have been the case, one thing we can say for sure: In the beginning hydrogen!' Theological inquiry presses the issue further and also asks some rather different questions: Why was there hydrogen and not simply nothing? Is hydrogen (matter) really eternal? What is the status of all that has developed from that primeval hydrogen, and what is its destiny? What is there in the origin of things that gives rise to values? These, and many similar questions, are ones the scientist, as scientist, does not ask or seek to answer. The theologian does.

Of course, everyone knows that scientists and religious people have often clashed in the past and still do clash at times. When that happens, it is because one trespasses in the field of the other. Religious people try to tell the scientists what they must find out about causes, the physical developments which led to the present state of the universe or relations between existing things (for example that the world was created in six days about 4004 B.C.E. or that the sun and the planets revolve around the earth).

On the other hand, the scientists may wrongly conclude that their research entitles them to pronounce on ultimate questions and to insist that matter, and matter alone, is eternal, that energy-matter is all that is and that all things have developed by the chance operation of inherent laws of matter.

It is not surprising that such clashes should occur. It is only in relatively recent times that theologians, philosophers and scientists have begun to sort out the kind of truth issues that are appropriate to their own areas of thought and inquiry. For thousands of years, the first chapters of Genesis had to serve as pre-science, pre-history and theology also. When other methods of inquiry were developed that enabled people to replace pre-science with genuine science, and pre-history with a new form of empirically established pre-history, the theologians were reluctant to give up their claims to be the ones who could say what the content of science and history is.

The problem was compounded by a doctrine of Scripture which claimed that it must be inerrant in every detail, whether it be in matters of history, geology, astronomy or theology. Only slowly have theologians come to accept the fact that their field is the theological one and no other and that the Bible also does not pretend to be a textbook of science and history but simply a witness to God's revelation to people through historical events and situations.

On the other hand, the scientists and historians having wrenched their territory away from the theologians, have tended to assume, at times, that they had the right to pronounce on the theological issues also, or they have asserted that since they have taken science and history away from the theologians nothing more is left. Only slowly are the scientists recognising the limits of their inquiry.

Theologians and scientists really need to listen to, and learn from one another. In fact, there are many scientists who carry on a dialogue with theologians and many more who are themselves men and women of deep religious faith. Equally, as Christians, we need to listen to the scientists and learn from them. There are times when ideas previously held on religious grounds have to yield to scientific research.

There was a time when the church insisted on grounds of religious belief that the sun and planets must revolve around the earth. When Copernicus and Galileo asserted, on the grounds of their observations and calculations, that the earth along with the rest of the planets revolve around the sun, they were vigorously opposed and even persecuted by the church. Today only very odd people would want to maintain that the earth is the centre of the solar system.

In the same way, we can no longer maintain that the earth and all that is in it was created in just the way it is described in Genesis. All the scientific evidence points to the fact that the universe and even the earth as we know it are millions of years old and that the processes that brought it to its present state were long and slow. Things were not created with a word and in a moment the way a magician says abracadabra, waves his wand and the bunny jumps out of the hat. In fact, we cannot really think of creation as an event that is past, rather we must think of it as a process which is still in train.

Jesus acknowledged that God's work was not something in the past. When he healed a sick man on the sabbath and was accused of doing what was not lawful, he defended himself by saying, 'My Father is working still and I am working' (John 5:17).

By listening to the scientists, we may at times even enrich and correct our theology. At the same time, there are theological insights which must not be conceded. Christians should not be intimidated by scientists who make pronouncements outside their own field and expect their views to have authority simply because they have made a name for themselves in some branch of science.

Creation and creationism

Nowhere has the clash between science and religion been fiercer than over Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin's book, *The Origin*

of Species, was published in 1859 and immediately brought forth loud protests from the church. The following year, there occurred the famous debate in which Thomas Huxley defended Darwin's position against the argument and ridicule of Bishop Wilberforce.

While many Christians have now reconciled their faith with evolutionary biology, there has continued to be a minority of Christians, especially in the United States of America, implacably opposed to the theory of evolution and the teaching of it in schools.

Early in the twentieth century, some States in the U.S.A. passed laws banning textbooks which taught evolution and in 1925 Tennessee went so far as to make it a crime to teach evolutionary ideas in schools. This law led to one of the most famous court cases in American history, the so-called Monkey Trial, in which a young teacher, John Scopes, was prosecuted for teaching evolution in one of the State high schools. Scopes was found guilty and fined $100, but in 1968 such laws were declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

With the resurgence of fundamentalism in America over the last quarter century, there has been a growth in support for a view of creation holding strictly and literally to the account in the first chapters of Genesis. Those who take this view in opposition to evolutionary theory are often referred to as creationists. They hold that the world was created by God not more than ten thousand years ago in six days of twenty-four hours, and that each species was created separately as they now are.

In the early seventies, the Institute for Creation Research was founded in San Diego by Dr Henry Morris and Dr Duane Gish. Members of the ICR claim to be Scientific Creationists, though their beliefs coincide with those of earlier creationists and with the Bible interpreted literally. However, they seek to argue their case scientifically without recourse to the authority of Scripture. And since they represent their position as science, they claim equal time for it in biology classes in schools. They were actually successful in persuading the Arkansas State legislature to introduce a bill providing for this, but again this law was ruled unconstitutional.

Many scientists with strong Christian commitment have attacked Creation Science as scientifically worthless and theologically dubious. They point out that the creationists' arguments would not only falsify biology, but also geology, physics, chemistry and even cosmology. If that were the case, we would be hard-put to explain why any technology based on such sciences actually works.

And to what end do the creationists argue their case? It is quite possible to hold that the Bible, including the first chapters of Genesis, is the inspired Word of God, providing us with important

truths about creation and the place of humans within it, without holding a position which can only incur the ridicule of educated people. The only issue at stake is the absolute inerrancy of Scripture read in a totally literalistic fashion.

It is impossible for us to go into all the arguments and counter arguments here. Already there is a very extensive literature on the subject and readers who are especially interested may pursue the subject for themselves.[4]

God the creator

If the universe has come to be from the will and power of God, who created it out of nothing, God is the ultimate origin of all things. There is no god but God and nothing is eternal as God is. In this affirmation there are two concepts which we must explore further.

The aseity of God

This strange word, aseity, comes from the Latin *ab se*, which means from himself. It refers to the fact that God does not receive being from any other person or power but has being from Godself. In this God is unique. Everything else has being from outside itself, namely from God, but there is no external source for God's being.

We could say that while everything else has being, God is being. This is the only answer there can be to the child's question, 'If God made everything, who made God?' No one made God. If anyone had made God, that Being would be God instead. God's being is from Godself. That is why, ultimately, God cannot be defeated. While everything else has its being from God and may lose it at God's will, God's being cannot be taken away.

The eternity of God

To say that God is eternal is to say almost exactly the same thing. God is without beginning and without ending. This is not to say, however, that God is timeless. For it is the triune God of whom we are speaking. In the very act of creation, God makes time and in Jesus Christ God has taken time to Godself for our sakes. To say that God knows past, present and future altogether because God is eternal is pure, biblically ungrounded speculation. God's eternity is one that includes temporality, though God's being is not bounded and limited by temporality as ours is.

The transcendence of God

God transcends the creation. Since God created the world out of nothing, there is a complete separation of being between God and the world. Were the world an emanation from God, or created out of God's own being, this separation would not be clear. The

transcendence of God rules out pantheism, the doctrine that God is to be identified with all that is. The world itself is not God.

When we speak of the transcendence of God, we also point to the fact that God is beyond the grasp of our limited powers of understanding. This poses a great problem for us. Langdon Gilkey puts it this way: 'if we find and describe God as an entity in our ordinary experience, then clearly [God] is not the Creator we have been discussing . . On the other hand, if we cannot so locate and describe [God] in terms of the names and relationships we use with other things, how can we know and understand [God] at all?' [5]

Gilkey goes on to point to the two ways in which attempts are made to describe God, namely by negation and by analogy. The latter should be familiar to us since we use analogies for describing all sorts of things, particularly when ordinary speech fails us. When we say that God is like a mother or father, we are using an analogy.

The way of negation seeks to say what God is not, leaving the nature of God as that which is unspoken. Augustine puts it thus: 'whatever [people] may think, that which is made is not like Him who made it ... God is ineffable. We can more easily say what He is not than what He is. Thou thinkest of the earth; this is not God ... What is He then? I could only tell Thee what He is not.'[6] Even these methods must presuppose that somehow God gives Godself to be known through a self-revelation in the world, as we considered earlier.

The immanence of God

Though we have denied pantheism by means of the concept of the transcendence of God, this does not mean that God is not immanent in all parts of the creation. If God is continually creating and sustaining the universe, this must mean that God is continually present to the whole of it.

Another way of stating this is to say that God is omnipresent. That is, God is not limited to some heavenly and holy sphere but is present everywhere. This idea is beautifully expressed in Psalm 139:7-12.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day;
for darkness is as light to you.

God's freedom

The Christian doctrine of creation also underlines the freedom of God. God is not dependent upon the world in order to be God. It was not because of some inner or outer constraint that God created the world. It is not a necessary part of being God that God should produce the world. Rather, God created the world out of nothing because of God's own good and free will.

That is not to say, however, that God is not untouched by what happens in the world. Therefore, we must be cautious about using the word immutable (changeless) of God. There is a sense in which it is true that God is unchanging. God's character is constant and dependable, but if God really does allow Godself to be touched by what happens in the creation, as the cross of Christ would suggest, there must be a sense also in which God is changed by what happens. Yet even that occurs because, being free from the world, God is also free for the world.

The omnipotence of God

In conformity with the biblical witness, we have already affirmed that God is almighty. Another way of saying the same thing is to affirm that God is omnipotent (all-powerful). While this is a useful term, it sometimes gives rise to false ideas about God, so we must take care how we understand omnipotence. It does not mean that God can do anything that can be put into words, such as making a round square. That is nonsense. Nor does it mean that God could do evil, because that would be contrary to God's nature. It means rather that God has the power to accomplish all that God wills. It means too, as mentioned above, that God, and God alone, has the power to exist in and of Godself. Therefore, there is no power in heaven or earth equal to or greater than God's power.

God's power must not, however, be thought of by analogy with the magician. The magician says the magic word, waves his wand, and the promised feat occurs. The way the creation story is told in Genesis 1 encourages us to think of God's power like that. God says: 'Let there be light' and there is light. Science has helped us to see that even God's power is not like that. It took countless ages to create a world that was fit for human habitation. Even though God has the power to accomplish what God wills, God takes time to do most things, just as we take time to do most of the things we have power to do.

It is very important to bear this in mind. A number of traditional theological problems, such as the problem of evil, would be less acute if people would give up this false, magician's wand understanding of God's omnipotence. To say that God is omnipotent is to make a faith claim. At present, God's omnipotence is not clearly evident in the world, since clearly much that is evil remains. We are confident, however, that ultimately God will prevail and all things will be brought into submission. The omnipotence of God is an eschatological concept, because only in the end will its reality and meaning be fully demonstrated and known.

When we speak of the omnipotence of God, we do not imply that God's creatures are divested of all power. God has delegated certain power to God's creatures and they can use that power to disobey God. Humans certainly do use their power in that way. Yet even when that happens God's power is of such a kind that God can continue to achieve the divine purposes, in spite of the rebellion of free creatures, without destroying their freedom in the process. God's ultimate power with respect to creatures is the power of God's love.

The omniscience of God

Omniscient is usually interpreted to mean all-knowing, but, as in the case of God's omnipotence, this definition is sometimes made the basis for all sorts of trivial and hypothetical questions. If God is present to all parts of the creation, naturally God knows what is happening in it. To speak of God as omniscient is not to suggest that God knows the answer to every hypothetical question. It is simply to affirm that God is not ignorant of what is happening in the universe and has all the wisdom and knowledge to govern the universe according to the divine will and to realise God's purposes.

Creation and ourselves

Just as the doctrine of creation has implications for our understanding of God, so it has for the understanding of ourselves and our lives.

Our dependence on God

To say that God is creator means first and foremost, as Luther put it in his *Small Catechism*, 'that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and the faculties of my mind ...' To put it another way, to believe in the doctrine of creation implies a confession of our absolute dependence on God. This human significance of the doctrine is beautifully expressed in the 95th Psalm.

The Psalm begins by calling upon the worshippers to sing praise to God the King and Creator; it goes on to say:

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Our lives are not our own

So our lives are not our own to do with them as we please. Of course, we are free and we can please ourselves within limits. We may indeed disobey God and use our freedom to do evil, but to do that is to engage in rebellion. God made us free to love and serve God, not to rebel and disobey. And since God is our Maker, to rebel against God must turn out badly for us.

The significance of our lives

Because we are God's creatures, 'the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand', our finite lives and the events in which we participate have, despite their smallness, their mystery and their frequently tragic character, a meaning, a purpose and a destiny not simply of our own making.

We should not, however, become too anthropocentric (human-centred). God has also created the other animals, trees and herbs and all things, not just for our use and convenience, but because it pleased God to create such a world. At the same time, creation needs to be held together with new creation. The triune God who created us has also redeemed us in Christ. That redemption is to flow on to the whole creation. So human beings have a particularly significant role in the plan of God

It is, amongst other things, the loss of this belief in the significance of human life, which has produced a sense of meaninglessness and aimlessness which massively afflicts western society today.

The material world

The doctrine of Creation has implications for our understanding of the material world. Amongst these are the following:

Denial of pantheism

The world is not God. The Christian doctrine of creation rules out pantheism. On the surface, pantheism seems to give too much to the creation. It suggests that it is divine. But even taking humanity alone as part of the creation, we know that men and women are

not God. Sin is too real for any such simple equation to be made. Humanity has in fact rebelled against God.

Below the surface, however, pantheism very often gives too little to the created order. Gilkey[7] points out that in Mahayana Buddhism, in Neoplatonism and in nineteenth century idealism, pantheism is coupled with a denial of the reality and value of individual, creaturely existence. He explains it this way: If finite things are God, and if God transcends their finite characteristics, then inevitably the creature as finite becomes unreal. Only if finite things have an existence, so to speak, 'of their own', separate and distinct from God, can they be said to be real as finite.

Nothing in creation has ultimate value

Since the material world is neither God nor an eternal reality alongside God but is God's creation out of nothing, its existence is precarious. This is true of its various parts. As the Scripture says, 'the mountains may depart and the hills be removed'; only God's steadfast love shall not depart (Isaiah 54:10).

Nothing in creation, therefore, has ultimate value and nothing is worthy of our worship. Idolatry of every kind is utterly foolish, not just the idolatry that carves a statue and calls it God, but also the idolatry of our modern, sophisticated, technological society which ascribes exaggerated worth to the Rolls Royce, the large house with all its modern conveniences, the sleek yacht, the hi-fi system, the wardrobe of fashionable dresses or whatever it may be.

Nothing created is intrinsically evil

On the other hand, if all things have come into being by God's will alone, nothing in creation can be intrinsically evil. This is not to deny that evil is real and terrible. This is a subject we shall have to return to. What is denied is that the material world can be intrinsically evil. And if it is not intrinsically evil, it is not beyond redemption or improvement.

This Christian view of the world stands in great contrast to those ancient views of matter which regarded it as so incurably evil that nothing could be done about it. One simply had to endure the evil until at last death liberated the soul from its material prison. Into a world dominated by such philosophies, Christianity has come as a message of hope.

The material creation is real

According to the Christian view, creation is no illusion. It is real. What is more, though ultimately dependent upon God and hence precarious, it has a certain independence. God has given it a being quite apart from God's own being. It has a freedom to be itself and a certain order of its own.

Because this is so, it can be studied. To study the world is not a sacrilegious prying into the divine. What is more, it yields to study because it has its own independent order. The sun arises each day not because God says to it: 'Get up, you lazy-bones, and start shining', but because there are certain laws governing the rotation of the earth and hence the time at which daybreak will occur.

This was a very different understanding from the one that prevailed in many cultures at the time. It was this Christian view of creation which helped open the way for the systematic study of phenomena and hence assisted in the development of science and technology.

The world does not belong to us

The world is not ours but God's. The success of human science and technology has perhaps led us to think that the creation belongs to us and, in sofar as we can get at it, is totally at our disposal. Not so! says the doctrine of creation. The world belongs to God, its maker. We are stewards only and must give account of our stewardship.

Even that may be to exalt too highly our position with respect to the rest of the world. We seem to be able to do a great job of messing up the world, but how puny we are compared with the mighty forces of nature! What force has our stewardship in comparison with them?

Technology, secularisation and ecology

In this latter part of the twentieth century, no consideration of the doctrine of creation would be complete without some discussion of the relation of the doctrine to these issues. Many people have claimed that the Christian doctrine of creation has been directly responsible for the development of modern technology, the process of secularisation and the ecological problems which now so seriously confront the world.

At first glance, it would appear that there is some truth in this assertion. It is fairly obvious that it is precisely in the Western World, the world of Christendom, that science, technology and secularisation have developed furthest and most rapidly. It is also in this part of the world that the ecological problems are the most acute. But things may not be exactly as they appear on the surface. We need to look more carefully at these matters.

The development of science and technology

Some of the reasons suggested to explain the rapid rise of science and technology in the Christian world have already been noted. First, the notion that the world was created by the one God who

gave to it a separate and orderly existence meant that the world was dedivinised or, as is sometimes said, disenchanted.

Where the primal religions suggested that every tree, rock and stream had its own spirit who would be deeply angered if people were to interfere with the object in which it dwelt, Christianity came along and said: 'There are no spirits. These are only inanimate things; have no fear!' Thus they could be inspected, studied, used without fear, and often without respect or responsibility.

Secondly, the relative independence of the world together with its apparent orderliness suggested that God had given to it a certain mathematical order which could be grasped by the God-given reason. The affirmation that the material world is basically good, rather than intrinsically evil, meant that it was not to be despised but warranted study and understanding.

Finally, there was the suggestion in Genesis and elsewhere that humankind has been given a certain lordship over the rest of nature. This acted as a spur to men and women to try to understand the world more fully and exercise the maximum control over the natural order.

Though there is truth in all this, John Macquarrie advises caution against too hurriedly ascribing the development of science and technology quite simply to this cause. The rise of science is a quite complex phenomenon. It is true, he says, that Christianity did help to dedivinise and desacralise the world and thus removed a hindrance to the development of science and technology. However, there was little interest in science and the natural world amongst the Hebrews.

At a corresponding period, there was much more interest and activity amongst the Greeks. It was they who contributed the spirit of inquiry and philosophical speculation which was quite vital for the development of science. He points out that in the Middle Ages, Christianity almost blotted out this influence and the development towards modern science ceased. It only came into its own again with the Renaissance when the movement was revitalised largely through the influence of Arab culture.[8]

Macquarrie's point is well taken. We need to be wary of extravagant claims about the role of the Christian doctrine of creation in the development of modern science. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that it was one important contributing factor.

Secularisation

Secularisation is a process generally associated with the development of science and technology, and therefore some people have seen this process also as an outcome of the Christian doctrine of creation.

The words secular and religious are often taken as opposites. In some senses they are but they do not always or necessarily exclude one another. Priests who belong to monastic orders are referred to as religious, while ordinary diocesan clergy are called secular priests. That does not mean the latter are irreligious. They are called secular because their life is totally within the world, rather than partly or wholly in the monastery.

The word secular comes from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning an age or era. In medieval Latin, *saeculum* came to mean this present age in contrast to the age to come. From there it was a short step to its present meaning of this-worldly and non-ecclesiastical as opposed to religious or under church control. So secularisation refers to the process through which more and more areas of life have been removed from the control of religious organisations and have been placed in the sphere of autonomous and this-worldly action.

We are all involved in this process. We draw a strict line between church and state. We no longer simply pray about disease plagues which afflict beasts and humans. We take scientific action to discover their cause and bring them to an end. We do not simply pass over serious accidents as being the inscrutable will of God. We demand that inquiries be undertaken to determine the causes and to eliminate them. To meet our physical needs and resolve our physical problems, we rely more and more on science and technology and less and less on prayer and divine aid.

In spite of that, many thoroughly modern people continue to be Christians because they do not believe that the this-worldly sphere exhausts reality. Indeed they would hold that, precisely in the matters that are called this-worldly, they are met by God and are called to live as Christians.

Secularisation and secularity must, however, be distinguished from secularism. The latter is an '-ism', an ideology, according to which the partial view of secularity is elevated to the status of a total interpretation of the whole of reality. The word was first used is 1851 by the minor British philosopher, G. J. Holyoake, as a name for his philosophical and ethical system which had no place for God. Generally, secularism maintains that matter is all that is, and that mind, or spirit, is just a function of matter. Consequently, existence is totally temporal and this-worldly.

Though Christianity and secularism are incompatible, Christians can affirm much that has happened in the process of secularisation. Like so many other human developments, secularisation presents us with possibilities both for good and for evil

On the negative side, it must be admitted that there is a tendency for secularisation to lead on to secularism. Naturally Christians

want to resist this. It is not inevitable and perhaps one of the tasks Christians must undertake in this age is that of preventing this from happening.

This will not be done by trying to reverse the process and resacralise the world. It can only be done by helping the world to remain secular. Thus Christians should not aim to unify the church and the state as has been done in the past and is sometimes attempted in Islamic countries. They should aim for a truly secular state, that is to say, one in which no one religion and no one ideology is established or favoured but in which there is impartiality and freedom for all beliefs to be held and expressed.

So also faith should not try to make science an arm of religion, nor should science be allowed to become an ideology in itself to replace religion. It has its own secular function to perform and should be permitted and encouraged to get on with its own job.

That is not to say that life should be divided up into watertight (or belief-tight) compartments. There will need to be dialogue between church and state as well as between science and religion, but trouble inevitably begins when one wants to take over the role of the other.

Religious people are often reluctant to admit the positive side of the secularisation process. It is probably easier to admit its virtues in societies other than our own. For that reason, Lesslie Newbigin chose to illustrate the value of secularisation by reference to Indian society.[9] He points out that Christian missions in India attempted over a long period to eliminate from Indian society a number of things regarded as gross evils, such as untouchability, the dowry system, temple prostitution, etc. The British colonial government tried to protect traditional religious customs, even inhuman practices like the burning of widows.

When independence came to India, a secular state was established. That meant that legislation was no longer determined by what was said in the Sutras or the Koran. As a result, many of the things which the missionaries fought against have been abolished and the things for which they worked, such as the spread of education and medical service, have been accomplished.

If we are tempted to argue that things would have been different in a nation whose major religion was Christianity, let us recall that the horrors of the Inquisition were only possible in states where there was no separation between church and government.

While government is only one area affected by the process of secularisation, these examples are enough to demonstrate that its effects are not all bad, nor is its opposite all good.

Ecology

Half a century ago, the word ecology was virtually unknown. Now it is being heard everywhere. From experience as well as from talk around the world, we know we have an ecological problem. In fact, there is a clutch of problems. In the first place, the earth's resources are being used up far too rapidly - more rapidly than they can be restored or substitutes found.

Secondly, the type of use to which the earth's resources are being put has disastrously affected the ecological system. Noxious wastes are being poured on to the land and into the air and the water faster than they can be absorbed, broken down or neutralised, so that the whole inter-related system of life-support is seriously threatened.

It has become fashionable to lay the blame for these problems on Christianity, and particularly on the Christian doctrine of creation.

One scientific writer, Lyn White, has accused Christianity of being the most human-centred religion the world has ever seen. He points out that in the creation story in Genesis, everything is planned explicitly for human beings, and that it is clearly God's will that they exploit nature.[10]

There is a superficial plausibility in this charge that Christianity is largely to blame for our ecological problems, since the problems appear to be most acute in those parts of the world that have a long history of Christianity. The accusation is more plausible still if the view that Christianity produced modern science and technology is accepted. We have already seen, however, that such a view is too simplistic. Christianity cannot take all the credit for making modern science and technology possible, nor should it accept all the blame for the present ecological crisis.

High technology certainly intensifies the problem, and high technology is mainly to be found in the West, but those who are familiar with parts of non-Christian Asia know that there also destruction of the environment has occurred, which in principle is no different from what is to be seen elsewhere in the world.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that as Christians we have not acted as responsibly as we should have. We have misinterpreted the doctrine of creation to suit ourselves; we have not had the respect for God's creation that we ought to have had, and we have got out of balance the command to fill the earth and subdue it. Our attitude to the world has been too human-centred. The world was not created just for our use and enjoyment. It is also for God's good pleasure (Psalm 104:26) and therefore other creatures have worth quite apart from their value to humans. So we need to reassess our thinking, our teaching and our action in the light of the crisis we are in, and with the guidance which Scripture gives us.

There are plenty of guidelines in the Bible if we care to heed them. If Christian people are not concerned about this issue and prepared to give a lead, whom can we expect to be responsible? The following are some of the points we need to keep in mind.

Dominion not despotism

It is true that in Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8:6, humanity's dominion over the earth and its creatures is stated, but the meaning of this dominion has been almost universally misunderstood. Claus Westermann[11] has pointed out that the word dominion comes from the language of kingship. The Hebrew king was specifically forbidden by God from being a despot after the pattern of the kings of the other nations. Those kings who, like Ahab, acted as despots, were rejected by God.

According to the Hebrew faith, the true king did not hold his position for his own good, but for the sake of the nation. He was responsible for the well-being of his subjects. He was to be the bearer and mediator of material and spiritual blessings. So humanity as sovereign of creation is specifically charged with responsibility for the preservation and good order of all that is entrusted to it. This is what dominion means. Far too often dominion has been replaced by selfish, irresponsible despotism.

Stewardship not ownership

When God gave humanity dominion over creation, God did not relinquish ownership of it. Thus humanity is not in the position of ownership but of stewardship. As stewards, we must give account to God for what we do, just as Adam and Eve were called to give account for what they had done (Genesis 3:8), and Cain was called to give account for what he had done to his brother (Genesis 4:10).

Responsible use not unlimited exploitation

God sets bounds to humanity's use of creation. According to Genesis 2:9 and 17, there were two trees in the garden from which Adam was forbidden to eat. There is a great deal of significance in this prohibition but at least part of that significance is the setting of bounds to the human use of the created world. It was precisely in overstepping those bounds that the first sin occurred and through sin people have been continually overstepping the bounds.

We are now arriving at the point where humanity must pay the penalty for this transgression. The penalty could well be the extinction of human life, and all other life, unless at last we recognise the limits God has set. Enough is enough! Limited and responsible use must replace unlimited exploitation.

The kinship of all creatures

The Bible stresses the kinship and oneness of humanity with all creatures, and this must be fully recognised in our lifestyle. Of course it is also said in Psalm 8:5 about humankind, 'you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour'. There is an important truth here not to be forgotten, but too often it has led us to think of ourselves as totally separated from other creatures living in a realm all of our own. This has had disastrous consequences because it has led us to think that we are not touched in any way by the fate we determine for other species.

The Bible also says that God made humans out of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). That is to say, human beings are made out of the same stuff as the vegetable and animal kingdoms. In our physical aspect, we do not stand above other living creatures but on the same level, and whatever diminishes them diminishes us. Our fate is tied up with theirs. We need to recapture this consciousness of oneness with other living creatures.

In fact, we need to go further and acknowledge our brotherhood and sisterhood with all creatures as that concept was expressed in the life and thought of St Francis of Assisi and in Albert Schweitzer's concept of reverence for life. When the bell tolls for another species that has become extinct, it also tolls for us. We have become the poorer. Our own extinction has come just that little bit closer.

Respect not desecration

The doctrine of creation needs to be held together with the doctrines of incarnation and redemption. In Jesus Christ, God has taken flesh (that is creatureliness) upon Godself and has entered into the creation. The whole created order has therefore a sacramental quality about it. We cannot treat lightly or irresponsibly that which God has worn as a garment. We do not wantonly desecrate it. We treat it with reverent respect.

It may be that people, misunderstanding what is said in the Bible, have developed destructive attitudes to the creation. If that is so, Christians have a special responsibility to emphasise those aspects of the biblical witness and of Christian theology which promote responsible attitudes. Perhaps no other issue highlights more strongly the need for a sound doctrine of creation than does the ecological crisis of our time.

Notes

[1] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.14.20.
[2] Some scholars would argue also that a biblical basis for creation out of nothing can be found in Hebrews 11:3
[3] J. Macquarrie: 'Creation and Environment' in *The Expository Times*, Vol. 83, No. 1.
[4] On the Creationist side, readers are referred to H. M. Morris: *Scientific Creationism*, Creation-Life Publishers, 1974, and D. T. Gish: *Evolution? The Fossils Say No!*, Creation-Life Publishers, 1979. For the case against Creation Science, see M. Ruse: *Darwinism Defended*, Addison-Wesley, 1982, and P. Kitcher: *Abusing Science*, Open University Press, 1983.
[5] L. Gilkey: *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, Anchor Books, 1965, p. 99.
[6] L. Gilkey: *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, p. 100.
[7] L. Gilkey: *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, p. 51.
[8] J. Macquarrie: *God and Secularity*, Lutterworth Press, 1968, p. 54.
[9] L. Newbigin: *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, S.C.M. Press, 1966, pp. 14f.
[10] Lyn White's article, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis' may be found in G. de Bell, ed.: *The Environmental Handbook*, Ballantine, 1970.
[11] C. Westermann: *Creation*, Fortress Press, 1974, pp. 52f.

7

God's human creatures

What does it mean to be human - to be a man or a woman? The question is itself part of the answer, since only a human being asks such questions. As Jurgen Moltmann points out, a cow is always simply a cow. It does not ask 'What is a cow? Who am I?'[1] Of course, even humans may evade these questions about their nature and may never ask them in any deliberate or self-conscious manner, but at lower levels of consciousness, nobody can avoid such questions. We are inevitably confronted with them as we face up to various elements in our natural and social environment.

The question of who we are arises first from comparison with the animals. We are bound to recognise that, in not a few respects, we are inferior to the other animals. We lack the speed, the agility, the acuteness of sense perception, the adaptation to environment and the whole apparatus of instinct that animals possess.

The unease of human beings in comparison with the animals is given expression in the dozens of shaggy-dog stories that have their vogue from time to time. About the things that trouble us but that cannot be changed, the best we can do is laugh.

Because of the deficiencies mentioned, human beings would long ago have become extinct had it not been for superior intellect, imagination and creativeness. So in comparison with the animals, humans feel ambivalent; in many respects, we feel inferior but in some quite crucial areas we feel superior.

Increasingly the question about the nature of humanity arises by comparison with machines, particularly computers and computerised machinery. The most immediate threat from computers is that of putting people out of work and causing a chronic problem of unemployment. In the long run, they are

cheaper than people and they are more reliable and less demanding. More basically, computers are more efficient than the human brain in performing many calculations and in the storage of information.

Anxiety about computers is expressed in the many science fiction books and films in which computers rebel against their human masters and put the human race in jeopardy. At the moment, that appears to be far-fetched. Computers do not have initiative or even what might be called common sense. They do not have life and are even more vulnerable to attack and destruction than humans. Yet they pose a threat, not least of all because they appear to undermine human self-confidence at the point where humans have felt their superiority, in brain-power.

The question also arises from a comparison of the human with the divine. 'What are human beings', asks the Psalmist, 'that you are mindful of them, and mortals that you care for them?' (Psalm 8:4). The answer given is: 'You have made them little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour'.

The scientific advances of the past century appear to underline the appropriateness of that answer. Human intelligence and inventiveness are truly godlike. Though humans cannot create a universe, they can understand it. From the structure of the atom to the age of the galaxy, the universe yields its secrets to the probing minds of men and women. But that is not the whole story. Humans know that they are not immortal and that their existence is in fact precarious.

What is more, in the presence of God they instinctively sense their puniness and unworthiness. Isaiah in the temple speaks for countless people of all times and places: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips' (Isaiah 6:5). In stark contrast with our powers to understand the universe is our lack of will and wit to govern our own affairs wisely or well.

Inevitably the question, Who am I? arises for us individually as we compare ourselves with other people. Some of our fellows pretend to be gods; some behave as though they are beasts; many treat us as though we are things or commodities. How then can we decide what it is to be human? Here, as much as in any area of inquiry, we need the witness of Scripture in its fullness, and particularly the person of Jesus Christ.

Humankind as part of creation

In the first place, we must take notice of the statement in the book of Genesis: 'then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the

ground' (Genesis 2:7). Man and woman are part of creation, inseparably linked to the rest of the created order, and by no means alien spiritual visitors to it.

This matter must receive undue emphasis today, just because in the past the place of humankind at the crown of creation has been emphasised to such an extent that humans have tended to think of themselves as something apart. The governing biblical conception has been the Psalmist's 'a little lower than God', rather than the Genesis author's 'from the dust of the ground'. To be sure, there is a special glory and dignity about humankind, and we must surely deal with that, but it must never be so emphasised that we lose the sense of our common creatureliness with earth and water, plants and animals.

What is more, we must not spiritualise our life and being by denying the physical, earthy component. We may not live by bread alone, but we cannot live without bread either. The spiritual and the physical can only be distinguished relatively and not absolutely. Some Christians once thought that in burning people at the stake they were doing no harm to their real being, on the assumption that a person's real being is the soul - a kind of spiritual kernel somehow hidden in the physical form. That was a terrible mistake. A person's physical nature is as much an essential part of his or her being as any other. God formed humans out of the dust of the ground, not out of Godself.

On this point, it is interesting to compare Christianity with some forms of Buddhism. For the Buddhist, the supreme aim in life is to break free from the claims, compulsions and delights of the world. As Frank Nichol suggests[2], the world is like a great octopus whose tentacles reach to the innermost centres of a person's being and from which the person must break free, either by a sharp and violent effort, or by slow, laborious disengagement.

This means an end not only to base lusts but to the joys of marriage and family, the appreciation of music, art and nature, and even concern for our fellow human beings. Certainly in Christianity also there is a genuine element of asceticism, but along with that goes a full appreciation of all that is good in the world.

The Bible teaches us to love and honour parents, to accept marriage and hold it in honour, to rejoice in the birth of children, to deal uprightly and to care for our neighbours. The Bible does not, however, encourage us to adopt an easy-going philosophy of eat, drink and enjoy yourself since it makes clear that with every possession and every relationship given to us goes a responsibility. To opt out of worldly affairs in a pietistic fashion is to opt out of these responsibilities.

The idea of the immortal soul

It is most unfortunate that the Christian understanding of humanity has been seriously led astray by the Greek idea of the immortal soul. According to the Greek view, a person consists of two parts: a physical body and an immortal soul, which is chained to the body at birth and imprisoned in it until death. It is the immortal soul which is the real person. The physical body is just a husk, a prison.

The Bible does not speak of the human person in this way. After saying that God formed humankind from the dust, Genesis 2:7 goes on to say that God breathed into the creature's nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (a living soul, according to the *Authorised Version*). As Westermann points out, this does not mean that a 'living soul ' is inserted into the human body; it means rather that man is created into or as a living soul, that is into a living being'.[3]

When the author of Ecclesiastes (12:7) says that the dust returns to the earth and 'the spirit returns to God who gave it', he is not referring to an immortal soul, but to this breath of life which God breathed into Adam's nostrils and which God receives back when the person ceases to be a living being. The *New Revised Standard Version* has actually chosen to translate the Hebrew word as 'breath'. The Hebrew Scriptures always regard the person as a unity which cannot be split up into body and soul (or spirit).

The same is generally true of the New Testament, in spite of one or two instances which appear to support the Greek view. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus warns his disciples not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather they are to fear the one (that is, God alone) who can destroy both body and soul in hell.

Though this looks like the traditional distinction between physical body and immortal soul, this in not the case. When the saying is reported in Luke's Gospel, all mention of soul is eliminated (Luke 12:4-6). What is more, according to the Greek view, neither body nor soul could be destroyed in hell: not the body for it is physical and perishes on earth, nor the soul for it is immortal.

It would really be better to translate soul here as life as it is in Matthew 6:25. Body and life are two sides of the person, the person viewed from two perspectives, not two parts of the person. The New Testament hope is not for the survival of an immortal soul, but the resurrection of the body. That is nothing short of a new creation.

This is made clear by Paul's argument (1 Corinthians 15:35-50) that the resurrection body is of a new kind, celestial rather than terrestrial, spiritual rather than physical. However hard this idea may be for us to grasp, it is certainly very different from the Greek concept of the bodiless existence of an immortal soul. The nature

of the Christian hope for the individual is something we shall have to consider more fully later; the point that is being argued here is that the Bible does not support the tendency on the part of some Christians to denigrate the physical aspect of human life and nature and to understand the person in purely spiritual terms.

The image of god in people

At the same time, the Bible surely does affirm the uniqueness and peculiar dignity of God's human creatures. Though part of creation, humankind stands out in that creation because people are related to God in a special manner. In biblical faith, the dignity and distinctiveness of humankind is characteristically set forth in terms of the doctrine of the image of God (*imago dei*). This concept goes back to the statement in Genesis 1:26-27, Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

What are we to understand by this statement? Does it apply to human beings as they are now, subject to sin, or did it only apply to Adam and Eve before they sinned? In other words, has sin marred or destroyed the image of God, or is it something that remains even in sinful humanity?

Lost or retained?

In the context in which it is set, the Genesis reference to the image of God would seem to suggest that it is something which permanently distinguishes human beings from the other creatures. This understanding of the image is also implied in 1 Corinthians 11:7 ('For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God') and James 3:9 ('... and with it [the tongue] we curse those who are made in the likeness of God').

However, in other parts of the New Testament, it is implied that the image is something that suffers change because of sin and which therefore needs to be recreated in the sinner. Thus the author of Ephesians urges readers 'to clothe [themselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God' (4:24). The same implication is to be found in Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10.

So the Bible appears to speak of the image of God in humankind in two quite different ways. On the one hand, it is something that lasts even in sinners, and on the other it is something destroyed and needing to be recreated. This was noted quite early by Christian theologians. In the second century, Irenaeus made a distinction between two conceptions of the image based on the fact that two

words are used in the Genesis creation story: *tzelem* (image) and *demuth* (likeness). The first of these was taken to be a structural thing which remained in spite of sin and was often identified by early theologians with reason, and the second was regarded as being a quality of relationship with God which had been lost through the Fall.

This distinction cannot be maintained on linguistic grounds. In the use of these two words, the writer of this Genesis passage was simply making use of the typical Hebrew poetic device of parallelism, that is of saying the same thing in two ways. Calvin recognised this fact and rejected this distinction. He, therefore, preferred to speak of a single image which was partially but not totally lost. Calvin writes of the image as follows:

> *Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection, but was subsequently so vitiated and almost blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused, mutilated, and disease-ridden. Therefore in some part it now is manifest in the elect, in so far as they have been reborn in the spirit; but it will attain its full splendour in heaven.*[4]

The views of Barth and Brunner

Earlier in this century, there was a famous and sharp debate between the two Swiss theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, over the nature of the image and the effects of sin upon it. Barth, at that time, argued that the image was totally lost through sin. Brunner denied this. Like Barth, Brunner rejected Calvin's view. It did not take account of the way in which the Bible speaks of the image both as that which permanently characterises humanity and as something which needs to be restored because of sin. Brunner proposed, therefore, that we should distinguish between the form and the content of the image. He maintained that the form remained in sinful humanity but that the original content was lost.

By the form of the image Brunner meant humankind's being in confrontation with God, the person's addressability, answerability or response-ability before God. By the content he meant the person's being in the love of God. The question has been raised whether it is possible to have form without content, but this is to push the geometrical analogy too far. In any case, Brunner did not deny all content, but only the original content.

Brunner's suggestion is helpful. He does not divide the image into two separate entities though he recognises the two viewpoints on the image taken in Scripture. He does not turn the image into something quantifiable but he recognises that the image both is present in human beings as they are and yet in one respect is also lacking.

Brunner's position has been taken up and affirmed by David Cairns, who sums it up by saying: 'Man is in the universal image of God because he stands in an inescapable relation of responsibility to God and man... His responsibility does not change though the form of his response may change to an almost infinite extent'.[5] As mentioned above, Barth originally argued that the image was totally lost through sin. This meant that humankind's capacity for God had been totally destroyed. In his *Gifford Lectures*, Barth said: 'Man has now become a tarnished mirror in which the glory of God can no longer be reflected. To be man means now to be an enemy of God and this means to be the destroyer of one 's own proper glory.' [6]

Barth later changed his mind. In the third volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, he wrote that the image of God is not a quality of human beings, so there is no point in asking in which attributes of humans it is to be located. Rather, it consists simply in the fact that humans are the creatures they are. If they were not in the image of God they would not be human. God determined to create beings who, in spite of their non-deity, could be real partners with God, capable of action and responsibility in relation to God.[7]

Barth believed that it was extremely significant that in Genesis 1:27, the statement that human beings were created in God's image is immediately followed by the statement 'male and female he created them'. So Barth interpreted God's decision to make humankind in God's likeness to mean that there should be between human beings a harmonious confrontation like that which exists in the Godhead. Just as there is in the Trinity a divine movement to a divine other, a divine call and answer, so there is to be such a movement in the nature of humanity.

Barth found this movement and response in the sexual polarity of humankind. People are in God's image because as in God so in humankind there are an I and Thou confronting each other. Barth asserted that the fact that humans were created as man and woman was a paradigm of all that would happen between people and God, as well as between people themselves. It would be a foreshadowing of the history of the covenant and of the salvation that would take place between human beings and their creator.[8]

Barth's later understanding of the image of God is much more complex than can be stated here and therefore it would be unwise to pass judgment without reading Barth himself. However, from what has been said perhaps it may be evident that Barth's position both raises some problems and suggests something important.

When we think of the image of God in human beings, and hence of the distinctiveness of humankind, one aspect of it must be the

capacity of human beings for relationships of a deep and complex nature both with God and with one another. Relationship and responsibility in relationship are what characterise human existence.

Implications of being in the image of God

A plethora of different views about the meaning and nature of the image of God in human beings have been expressed by theologians throughout the course of Christian history.[9] In their different ways, they would make at least some assertions in common. These would include the following:

1. Though humankind shares much in common with the rest of creation, there is something that is permanently distinctive about human beings that sets them apart from the rest of creation as we know it.
2. This distinctiveness is seen as a God-given and God-like quality. Thus humankind has a double kinship - both with the animals and with God. It is this latter kinship that is referred to by the concept of the image of God.
3. It is, in the first place, because humankind is made in the image of God that human beings have an inalienable dignity and worth. God values God's own image in humankind and people can and should do the same. It is because God values human beings supremely that God has come to redeem them in Jesus Christ, and this further establishes their dignity. No one may despise any creature for whom Christ died.

Individual and society

The dignity and worth of the individual person is a very important element in the Christian understanding of humankind. At the same time, some protest must be made against the excessive individualism that marks so much of our thinking in the western world.

While the worth and uniqueness of every individual must be constantly emphasised, we must not lose sight of the fact that individuals are lost without companions and society generally. We may already have reached a point in some parts of the world where emphasis on individuals and their freedom now threatens society as a whole, and paradoxically that means that the individual is also under threat just because the individual has been so exalted over against society as a whole.

So, along with the stress on the sacredness of the individual, there needs to be a due emphasis on the corporateness of humanity. As Barth has rightly maintained, humans are only fully human in relationship within a social fabric. We are mutually dependent and we must never forget it.

Racism, classism and sexism

Apart from the threat of excessive individualism, the chief threats to the solidarity of the human race come from racism, classism and sexism. No theological treatment of humanity today can afford to ignore these issues. Unfortunately, in a treatment as restricted as this, we cannot do justice to such important and enormous issues. All three are to be seen both as an expression of sin and as part of the outcome of human sin. Differences of race, function and sex are no longer taken as occasions for celebration, but as causes of suspicion, enmity and oppression. Individual is set against individual and group against group, and in the end there are no winners.

As in the case of all sin, God deals with these sins too in Christ. If we belong to Christ, these things have no place in our lives. For as St Paul reminds us, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek (racism), there is no longer slave or free (classism), there is no longer male and female (sexism); for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

Sin

In referring to the disruption of the human family, the role of sin has already been mentioned. We must now look at this matter more fully since Christians have generally maintained that, whatever God intended human nature to be, it is that no longer but is universally disfigured by sin.

When we speak this way we are, of course, using religious language. Outside the circle of believers the term is hardly used any more, and many Christians even are apologetic when they use the term. Political (and social) correctness forbids it. Even Christian theologians seem to have little to say about sin and good books on the topic are hard to come by.[10]

The tendency in society these days is to accept human nature as it is and to acknowledge that all of us have certain faults, weaknesses and hang-ups which produce anti-social and destructive behaviour. In a book pointedly entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Karl Menninger has written: 'The popular leaning is away from notions of guilt and morality. ... Disease and treatment have been the watchwords of today and little is said about selfishness or guilt or the morality gap. And certainly no one talks about sin.'[11]

Menninger, a psychiatrist, not a theologian, does not endorse this leaning but supports a proper use of the term sin. Following *Webster's Dictionary* he defines sin as 'transgression of the law of God; disobedience to the divine will; moral failure'. He goes on to say: 'The wrongness of the sinful act lies not merely in its non-conformity, its departure from the accepted, appropriate way of

behaviour, but in an implicitly aggressive quality - a ruthlessness, a hurting, a breaking away from God and from the rest of humanity, a partial alienation, or act of rebellion'.[12]

The Christian view is that such alienation and rebellion characterise every person. Sin is universal. It is found not only in the unredeemed, but is present also in the converted and the justified who, in this life, remain sinners even though righteous in the sight of God because of Christ. Even great saints have their flaws and are the first to admit it.

The testimony of Scripture is clear on this matter. The Psalmist says, 'They have all fallen away; they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one' (Psalm 53.3). Again the Psalmist asks: 'If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?' (Psalm 130:3). Jeremiah has said, 'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse - who can understand it?' (Jeremiah 17:9).

Original sin

Christian theology has traditionally found a basis for the universality of sin in the concepts of the Fall and original sin. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, so the theory goes, human nature became fallen and corrupt. This fallenness with its accompanying corruption was transmitted biologically to all succeeding generations of people, so that from the very beginning every person born into the world is a sinner.

This inherited sin is what is referred to as original sin. Augustine even taught that each person born not only inherits the corruption of Adam's nature but even the guilt of Adam's sin.

The Reformers also gave a prominent place to this doctrine. It receives extensive treatment in Calvin's *Institutes*, and Wesley devotes one of his standard *Forty-Four Sermons* to this topic. The Lutheran theologians who framed the *Augsburg Confession* in 1530 made Original Sin the second article and wrote as follows:

> *It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.*[13]

In addition to delivering us to the wrath of God, original sin, according to the Reformers, resulted in the total depravity of human nature. Thus in the *Formula of Concord*, the Lutheran

theologians wrote: 'We believe, teach and confess that original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but that it is so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man's body or soul, in his inward or outward powers.'[14]

However, the Reformers never intended to suggest that the unredeemed person was incapable of any good actions whatsoever. In fact, Calvin, for one, held a very high estimate of the natural capacities of humankind in such matters as government, household management, mechanical skills, science and the liberal arts. What the Reformers did want to affirm was that no part of human nature has been left untouched by sin. In particular, they wanted to affirm that human reason cannot be trusted without reserve, especially in matters relating to the knowledge of God, the nature of righteousness and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom. Even more importantly still, they wished to affirm that sin had brought the human will into a fatal bondage.

Opposition to the doctrine

While the majority of Christian theologians through the centuries has supported the doctrine of Original Sin, there has always been a minority that rejected it. One of the earliest opponents who made a name for himself was the British lay monk, Pelagius, who was teaching in Rome around 400 C.E. He taught that the sin of Adam injured himself alone and not the whole human race. Each newborn child is in the same state Adam was in before he sinned and has no need of baptism to cleanse it from original sin. What is more, the human will is not in bondage and any person can live without sin if he or she wishes.

Pelagius would find few wholehearted supporters amongst Christian theologians today. His understanding of human nature was too superficial. He would more likely find support outside the church where sentimental and unrealistic views of human nature still persist in spite of the Holocaust, the Gulag Archipelago, the killing fields of Cambodia, the horrors of Vietnam, Bosnia, Rwanda and the rest.

Difficulties in the doctrine

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are a number of difficulties in the traditional doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin. First, the idea that guilt can be inherited is difficult to understand and would appear to be contradictory to any notion of justice and particularly in conflict with our understanding of the righteousness of God.

Secondly, the story in Genesis 3 does not state or imply a doctrine of Original Sin. The Old Testament scholar, Claus

Westermann, maintains that such a doctrine is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament. The concept is first found expressed in Jewish literature in the fourth book of Esdras (7:118) where the writer says:

O Adam, what have you done?
For though it was you who sinned,
the fall was not yours alone,
but ours also who are your descendants.

Westermann points out that this idea is not found in the teaching of Jesus. It is found in Paul's writings but it was not from Jesus nor the canonical Hebrew Scriptures that he derived the idea.[15]

A further difficulty is that biblical scholarship has shown that the story of Adam and Eve is not to be taken as history, and in the light of general scientific and historical studies it is now very difficult to conceive of a pair of people somewhere in the past who were perfect until they engaged in a primal act of disobedience to God.

Taken not as an historical account of how humankind came to be in the state it is, but as a parabolic expression of how things stand with the human race as we find it now, the story of Genesis is a powerful and suggestive statement, profoundly relevant and enlightening. The implications of the story accord very well with contemporary Christian analysis of sin and the human state. Following the rather optimistic view of human nature that held vogue during the latter part of the nineteenth century, twentieth century theology has returned to Genesis 2 and 3 with renewed interest and appreciation.

The meaning of the doctrine

The role of the serpent in the story of Adam and Eve suggests that sin entered the human race from outside. God did not create humans as sinners and it was not God's intention that they should use their freedom to rebel against God. Evil exists before Eve transgresses God's commandment. It is bigger than human perversity.

At the same time, the account of Adam and Eve's transgression points to the fact that human beings are easily seduced. Transgression and defection from God are human phenomena. There is a kind of interdependence in sin. In the story, Eve involves Adam. In real life, parents involve their children. Social institutions entangle in sin those who come within their orbit. 'Society has made me like this' is a common excuse.

The Psalmist wrote, 'Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me' (Psalm 51:5 RSV). The reference is not to any particular wrongdoing in relation to his conception. The Psalmist is referring rather to the social network of sin into which we are all born. It is almost like a congenital

disease. Sin is there waiting for us at the moment we are born, waiting to draw us into actual sinful acts.

The Genesis story makes it clear that the essence of human defection is the doubting of God and God's Word, which is unbelief, together with the desire to be equal with God, which is pride.

Pride and unbelief result, first of all, in alienation from God. When God seeks Adam in the Garden following Adam's transgression, he and Eve hide themselves. They can no longer face God. As a consequence of their sin, they are expelled from the Garden, the place of God's presence, where they and God commune with each other. That means that humankind now experiences God as one who is far off. God seems distant, even absent. It has always been so, but this sense of the absence of God has become most poignant in recent times, so that many who once believed and were sure of God's presence have spoken of the death of God.

The sins of pride and unbelief result, secondly, in the spoiling of the whole of life. Domination and exploitation characterise the relationship between the sexes. The bearing and rearing of children bring pain as well as joy. Work, instead of being pure satisfaction, is filled with frustration and disappointment. Thus humankind finds itself bound together not only in a community of sin, but in a community of the effects of sin.

Though it does not come out in this story specifically, there is a distinction to be made between sin as a state of rebellion against God, and sins as individual unethical and immoral actions. Humankind is not sinful because people commit sins, but they commit sins because they are sinful. Selfishness, dishonesty, theft, anger, murder and war are just some of the sins that flow from this basic human sinfulness.

Legalism and prophetism

In his book, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur has pointed to the tension in the Old Testament between prophetism and legalism.[16] Legalism highlights individual breaches of God's commandments. It is concerned about sins. The prophets, on the other hand, penetrated beyond individual faults to the radical evil in the heart. They called not just for a few changes in how people were living, but for a radical change of direction, a new attitude in the heart.

The prophetic insight reminds us that original sin results in a loss of freedom. Of course, we still have freedom to make many choices. We are not bound in some kind of rigid determinism in which every choice is a delusion. What sin has destroyed is the fundamental freedom to respond to God as God wills us to. In accordance with legalism, we can avoid any particular sin, but we cannot not be a sinner. Only God can deal with that situation.

The Genesis story itself reminds us of the fact that we are powerless to change our situation. After their transgression, Adam and Eve saw themselves as naked, not just before each other, but also before God. They were ashamed. They tried to help themselves, and they could to some extent. They made aprons out of leaves, but their efforts were inadequate to deal with their shame. So the story tells us that the Lord God made for the man and his wife garments of skins and clothed them (Genesis 3:21). So even in transgression God provides for their need.

This is a way of saying that God accepts humankind as it is, with all its weakness. It is God's will that men and women not be constantly oppressed by the consciousness of their sins. So it is God who deals with human sin and its implications.

Common or prevenient grace

Not only does God deal with the shame of sin, but, according to both the Reformed and Methodist traditions, God also sets a limit upon the ravages of sin. According to both traditions, or at least many representatives of them, were sin not restrained by God, human society would be impossible and perhaps human life itself would long ago have become extinct. But God is not willing that this should happen and therefore God has provided a restraining and ameliorating grace.

In the Reformed tradition, this is referred to as 'common grace' and in the Methodist tradition as 'prevenient grace', that is grace that precedes saving grace. According to John Wesley, by this means a measure of freedom and natural conscience is restored to fallen humanity, so that even in its fallenness human life may continue and people may have the possibility of responding to God's saving grace.

The full extent of God's gracious action to remedy sin is not to be seen in the Genesis story or even in the Old Testament as a whole. It is seen only in the New Testament, where it becomes clear that for sinful men and women God sent the Son into the world so that through him all who believe may be utterly cleansed, forgiven and restored.

If we really wish to know what humankind is intended to be by God, and hence what humanity really is, it is to the New Testament that we must look, to the person of Jesus and to the promise and hope we have through him of being the sons and daughters of God.

Notes

[1] J. Moltmann: *Man*, Fortress Press, 1974, p. 1.
[2] F. Nichol: *Christian Beliefs*, Christian Life Curriculum, 1970, p. 25.
[3] C. Westermann: *Creation*, Fortress Press, 1974, p. 77.
[4] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I/15/4
[5] D. Cairns: *The Image of God in Man*, Fontana, 1973, p. 202.
[6] K. Barth: *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1949, p. 50.
[7] K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics* III/1, T. & T. Clark, 1958, pp. 184-5. A similar view is expressed by the Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, who wrote 'Man does not simply bear of have the image of God; he is the image of God. From the doctrine that man has been created in the image of God flows the clear implication that that image extends to man in his entirety.' Quoted in Anthony A. Hoekema: *Created in God's Image*, Eerdman's/ Paternoster, 1986, p. 65.
[8] K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics* III/1, pp. 186-7.
[9] For a summary of some of these views, see the works of Cairns and Hoekema cited above.
[10] An exception to this is the excellent book by Ted Peters: *Sin - Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, Eerdmans, 1994. Also recommended is M. Scott Peck: *People of the Lie*, Rider, 1988. Some perceptive insights about sin will also be found in C. Colson: *Loving God*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984, especially chapters 9 and 10.
[11] K. Menninger: *Whatever Became of Sin?*, Hawthorn Books, 1973, p. 228.
[12] K. Menninger: *Whatever Became of Sin?*, pp. 18-19.
[13] T.G. Tappert, Ed.: *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 29.
[14] T.G. Tappert, Ed.: *The Book of Concord*, p. 108.
[15] C. Westermann: *Creation*, p. 108.
[16] P. Ricoeur: *The Symbolism of Evil*, Beacon Press, 1969, pp. 57-59.

8
The problem of evil

A definition

Evil is everything that undermines and detracts from the goodness of the creation. It is everything that is disorderly, chaotic and unruly, all that produces suffering and sorrow, all that stands in opposition to the goodness of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Evil is commonly divided into two kinds. Firstly, there is moral evil, which consists of cruel, unjust, destructive actions resulting from the wilful decisions of personal beings. Then there is natural evil consisting of such things as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, droughts, cancers, viruses causing severe illnesses and similar things. They cause pain and suffering to both animals and humans but are quite independent of human volition and action. Both of these kinds of evil constitute problems for Christian thought and action.

Problems posed by the existence of evil

For Christian theology, there is the problem of how evil comes to be present in a universe created out of nothing by a good and loving God. Where has this evil come from? Or simply accepting the fact that evil is present in the universe and persists, why does God not remove it?

Traditionally, the problem has been stated as follows: If God is all-loving but unable to prevent or remove evil, God cannot be omnipotent. If God is omnipotent and does not prevent and eliminate evil, God cannot be all-loving. If God is both all-loving and omnipotent, what explanation can there be for the persistence of evil?

The theological problem posed by the existence of evil is one of the greatest obstacles to belief in God, and therefore it requires very serious consideration and demands an answer. The attempt

to deal with the problem intellectually is called *theodicy*. This term, coined by the philosopher Leibniz in 1697, is derived from the Greek words meaning God and justice. Literally it is the attempt to justify God in the face of all the evil which we experience in the world.

The problems raised by the existence of evil are not only intellectual and theological; they are also practical. These include the problem of how we are to deal with evil so that to some extent it may be restrained and minimised, how we are to help the victims of evil and how people may be prepared for dealing with evil themselves.

Evil in other world-views

Evil is not as big an issue for some other world-views as it is for Christianity. Evil poses no intellectual problem for atheism. It has no God to justify. It explains evil in terms of chance and the blind working of natural forces. Human beings simply are the way they are, capable of loving and doing good but also capable of inflicting hurt and suffering on other creatures and on one another.

Atheists would argue that it is our wrong belief in the existence of God which poses for us a false intellectual problem. They would urge us to drop this belief in God and get down to the practical problem of minimising the impact of these so-called evils on the world and human beings through the appropriate use of science and technology and whatever other means are at our disposal.

Deists also have no intellectual problem to solve. While they believe that God exists they would insist that God is not concerned about human beings, and even if such a concern existed God could do nothing about it anyway. For them also the only issue is the practical problem of how to make human beings more humane and more helpful to the victims of evil.

Dualists also have a ready explanation. They believe that alongside God there is either eternally existing matter which resists God's attempts to order and rule it, or that there is another eternally existing deity (or devil) who is evil and continually spoils God's efforts to make the world good. This view explains evil quite easily but at the cost of compromising the Christian understanding of God and destroying the Christian doctrine of creation.

The biblical view of evil

The Bible regards evil as real, but it makes no attempt to offer a clear and coherent explanation of it. The nearest it comes to that is in the account of the origin of moral evil found in Genesis 2 and 3, but this account leaves many questions unanswered.

According to the account given there, after his creation Adam was placed in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it, but God

forbade Adam to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the serpent, more crafty than any other animal, enticed Adam's companion, Eve, to eat the fruit of that tree. And she gave the fruit to Adam and he ate also. They disobeyed God and their original innocence was lost.

The implication in the story is that had it not been for the serpent, Adam and Eve would not have been disobedient and would have preserved their innocence. Paradoxically, it is a creature of God which leads the human pair into their first sin. According to the traditional interpretation, the serpent is identified with Satan, but in the text itself there is absolutely no hint of this. It was only much later, in *The Wisdom of Solomon*, that this identification was made for the first time, and later still was taken up by the author of the book of Revelation (Revelation 12:9). According to Genesis 3, the serpent with its cleverness was a noble creature of God, only later condemned to crawl in the dust because of its enticement of Eve.

Here then is the paradox: it is God who has created the very thing which leads to transgression, and to that extent is responsible. Yet Adam and Eve know that the decision to be disobedient is theirs and they recognise their culpability even though they try to shift the blame, Adam onto the partner God has given him, and hence onto God, and Eve onto the serpent. They are the ones directly responsible, even though indirectly some responsibility also falls back on God.

In various parts, the Bible also deals with the problem of natural evil. The catastrophes which befell people, cities and nations were recognised as evil. Some Old Testament authors had no hesitation in ascribing at least some of those evils directly to God (Amos 3:6; Isaiah 45:7).

There are also spiritual agents of evil, though, according to the Old Testament, they are strictly under God's control. Thus while it is Satan who causes all manner of evil to fall upon Job and his household, he is only able to do this by God's permission, and a strict limit is set upon how far he can go (Job 1:12). (See also Judges 9:23 and 1 Kings 22:21-23.)

The book of Job is entirely devoted to the problem of evil. Why do people suffer, and in particular why is it that the righteous suffer? The common view of the time was that God takes care of the righteous and that only the guilty suffer. Hence Job's friends urge him to seek God and confess his sins, to accept with patience God's punishment and to hope that when he has paid for his misdeeds he may be restored to health and prosperity again.. Job rejects this explanation of his suffering, claiming to be innocent of any wrongdoing that would justify such punishment.

The book of Job thus rejects the common view of suffering but does not appear to offer any clear explanation in its place. Probably

all that can be said is that the author saw suffering as rooted in the nature of things. Suffering is simply part of existence which God allows and which people must accept. Still the author is not overly pessimistic, for he saw that alongside suffering life offers many good things and in particular there is the experience of the steadfast love of the Lord which preserves the spirit (Job 10:12).

Jesus also rejected the notion that suffering is the direct result of people's sin. See, for example, Jesus' response to those who told him about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed as they were bringing their sacrifices to the temple (Luke 13:1-4) and his response to the disciples who asked him who had sinned that a man had been born blind (John 9:3).

In the New Testament, we meet with a host of evil spirits who appear to be quite independent of God and are in fact God's enemies. They cause all manner of evil, both moral and natural. Their captain is the Evil One who is given various names and who is the controller of this world.

In his ministry, Jesus attacked the evil spirits, driving them out of people whom they had possessed, and in his death and resurrection Jesus did battle with the prince of evil and defeated him. So the decisive victory has been won, though his destruction and the abolition of evil will only take place at the final consummation. In the meantime, people are tempted and led astray and many continue to be victims of natural catastrophes.

Attempts to resolve the problem

In the history of Christian thought, many theories have been advanced to resolve the theological problem of evil. None of them is entirely satisfactory, though most of them have something useful to contribute. By combining the good insights of theologians across the centuries, the dimensions of the problem may be reduced though the problem is not fully resolved.

At the same time, it needs to be noted that logical solutions to the problem do not address the experience of suffering and evil. That calls not for argument but pastoral care. The last thing a person who has suddenly lost a child or spouse in an accident needs is a theological explanation of why it has happened. However, facing the problem theologically before we experience it as a personal reality may be some help. It may also provide an unseen foundation for the pastoral response which ministers, priests and lay people alike may be called upon to give when parishioners, friends and neighbours turn to them for help in time of tragedy.

In what follows we shall consider just a few of the philosophical and theological responses that have been made to the problem of evil, noting as we go their strengths and weaknesses.

The argument that evil is an illusion

The philosopher Spinoza (1632-77) argued that good and evil are not real entities at all, but just mental constructs. We come to the conclusion that a thing is either good or bad by comparing it with a general idea we have about that class of thing, or by considering its usefulness to ourselves.

Spinoza claimed we have no right to do either. There is no standard tree or human being that provides a norm against which every individual of the species is to be compared and judged. Each exists in its own right and must be accepted as it is. Nor should we assume that everything was created for our sake and is to be judged by how well it serves us. Spinoza believed that if we got rid of these erroneous ideas the problem of evil would vanish.

A modern example of this approach is the so-called Christian Science of Mary Baker Eddy. She also taught that evil is unreal. 'It is neither person, placè nor thing, but simply a belief, an illusion ...', she wrote.[1] What this means is made clear by what she has to say about boils. She wrote, 'A boil simply manifests through inflammation and swelling a belief in pain, and this belief is called a boil'.[2] Sin and death also she regarded as unreal and asserted that along with pain and sickness they too would disappear if they were understood as nothingness.

There are many difficulties in this kind of teaching. We do not get rid of evil by redefining it. Whether it is an illusion or whatever, we all know that we experience pain and suffering and that the experience ranges all the way from unpleasant to horrific. There is an old limerick which puts it in a nutshell:

There was a young man of Deal,
Who said though pain isn't real,
When I sit on a pin
and it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I think that I feel.

Even if evil is an illusion, we would still be compelled to ask why God has created a world in which such horrible illusions afflict us and why a loving, all-powerful God does not cause such illusions to cease.

Yet even in this least persuasive of arguments there is some good. We do judge some things to be bad, if not evil, because we do not recognise their value to us. Sometimes that is just plain short-sighted and careful study would show their value to the ecosystem on which we all rely. But even if they do not serve the human race, we may not on that account judge them to be evil because we do not have the right to demand that everything serve us.

Though pain and sickness are no illusion, we are well aware these days that many of our ills are 'psycho-somatic'. Our fears and anxieties, our stresses and bottled-up emotions can have unfortunate physical manifestation and if our inner life was healthier our bodies would be healthier also.

Protest theodicy

Protest theodicy is as old as the Bible. In the Psalms we read protests directed to God because of God's slowness to deliver righteous ones from oppression and suffering. When Jesus cried out from the cross, 'My God, my God; why have you forsaken me?' it was a protest. All through history the Jews especially have addressed their protests to God yet without ceasing to believe in God and without surrendering their Jewish piety.

John Roth recounts the story of a Jewish family which was expelled from Spain a long while ago. With no homeland to return to, wherever they went they were unable to find refuge. As a result of hardships and persecution, one by one the members of the family died until only the father was left. In his bitter sorrow he addressed God:

> *'Master of the Universe, I know what You want - I understand what you are doing. You want despair to overwhelm me. You want me to cease believing in you, to cease praying to you, to cease invoking your name to glorify and sanctify it. Well, I tell you: No, no - a thousand times no! You shall not succeed! In spite of me and in spite of you, I shall shout the Kaddish, which is a song of faith, for you and against you. This song you shall not still, God of Israel.'*[3]

Theodicies of protest affirm the omnipotence of God but will not affirm God's total goodness and all-lovingness. They recognise that people are responsible for much of the evil that afflicts the world but they insist that God must bear a share of the responsibility for the state of things. God could and should have made a better world and even now should act to lessen the outrageous suffering that afflicts all living things.

The protesters will not exonerate God. Nor will they legitimate evil by suggesting that God allows it in order to obtain some greater good. No matter what good things may be achieved here or hereafter, they say, nothing can justify the level of the world's pain. If suffering is supposed to achieve something good, God's methods are not cost effective.

While most people who are overwhelmed by the problem of evil conclude that God does not exist, the protesters will not let God off the hook on the ground that God does not exist. Yet their quarrel with God is no rejection of faith and worship. Jacob's

wrestling with the stranger all night long by the Jabbok is a paradigm of their Christian life (Genesis 32:24).

There is something appealingly realistic and honest about protest theodicies. Their refusal to legitimate evil by explaining it in terms of some greater good that may be achieved by it in the future is salutary. But to abandon the divine goodness and love, as they do, is an enormous and dangerous step to take. If God is not love, not only is revelation undermined, but so is every ground for trust and hope. This view also deprives us of any religious ground for human morality and justice, because evil and injustice in God inevitably legitimate human evil and injustice also.

A finite God theodicy

Rather than abandoning the idea of the goodness and love of God, some theodicies seek to solve the problem by abandoning the divine omnipotence. In one way or another, God is regarded as limited, so that however much God may desire to express the divine love and goodness, God is prevented from doing so by forces which, at least for now, prevent this.

This was the line taken by E .S. Brightman[4] back in the 1940s, though he recognised that many thinkers had held this view before him. The theistic finitist believes that 'the eternal will of God faces given conditions which that will did not create, whether those conditions are ultimately within the personality of God or external to it'. Where those conditions are external to the divine personality this view boils down to dualism, referred to in chapter 6, with all the disadvantages mentioned there.

Whether or not theistic finitism reduces to dualism, the problem with it is that it offers no grounds for hope. We cannot be certain on Brightman's view that the good but finite God will ever achieve the divine aim, even in the long run. The forces limiting God, be they eternally existing matter, an external necessity or an eternal Satan, may turn out in the end to be too strong for God. In that case, the best we can hope for is that we may be extinguished before that which opposes God achieves its victory.

Of course, the fact that the view is not a comforting one does not mean that it is not true, but at least we can say that it is not compatible with the faith of the New Testament or the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This theodicy is correct in pointing to problems associated with the traditional understanding of omnipotence, but it goes too far in abandoning the omnipotence of God totally. The concept only needs to be understood differently.

The common understanding is that the omnipotence of God means that God can, if God wills, do anything instantly, in the

same way that a magician can wave his wand and utter the magic word and that which has been promised in advance happens. God's omnipotence is not like that. Contrary to Genesis 1, it has taken God millions of years to create planet earth and all that is on it and it may take a lot more time yet for God to achieve ultimately the divine goal. The fact that it takes time does not negate the divine omnipotence; it simply means that omnipotence has to be understood differently.

Norman Pittenger has explained the true meaning of omnipotence very well:

> *Omnipotence can mean, and should mean, that God has all the power necessary to accomplish [God's] will, but not in spite of (rather through) the decisions of [God's] creation. And God's infinitude or ... transcendence is not to be seen in some absolute power to do anything, but in [God's] capacity to work inexhaustibly towards the accomplishment of [God's] purpose, with resources which are adequate, to meet and overcome in the long run (and sometimes the run may be very long! but God has all time to work in), everything that would distort and obstruct that end which [God] has in view.*[5]

This view of omnipotence does not leave us uncertain about the ultimate outcome. In the meantime we have some signs of that omnipotence, (for example in the resurrection of Jesus), and aspeople of faith we live looking in hope towards the triumph of God, but realising that along the way much may happen that runs counter to God's will as well as counter to our own sense of justice.

The best of all possible worlds

The philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716), published a theodicy in 1710 in which he argued that this is the best of all possible worlds. This world, he argued, permits a greater maximisation of being in terms both of quality and variety than any alternative universe. Leibniz believed that God made a choice from an infinite number of different universes which were present in idea to the divine mind. Each one included a complete history from creation on and each formed a tightly knit whole such that to alter the least feature would be to change the whole into a different universe.

Leibniz believed that all the evils that we recognise in the world contribute in ways we cannot yet see to the character of the whole as the best possible. Of course Leibniz knew that he could not demonstrate this because he could not, like God, lay out the plans of an infinite number of universes and compare them. His theodicy was thus in the nature of a hypothesis or a faith claim.

It has never been a psychologically compelling theodicy, though some people still argue for it. Though it had a certain popularity for a time, after the huge Lisbon earthquake of 1755 it lost favour. Voltaire's response was: 'If this is the best possible world, what are the others like?'

The basic problem in Leibniz's view is that it regards God as subject to an external necessity. There are fixed possibilities, each with its good and bad points, which have eternal existence in God's mind but are not subject to God's will. It is like shopping for a new car or a new washing machine. Each brand has its strengths and weaknesses and none combines all the strengths but has none of the weaknesses. Nor do we have the capacity to make a totally new model which does this. So we just have to figure out which is the best, recognising that whichever one we buy will have some bad points.

This theodicy has something in common with the previous one and must lead even more surely ultimately to pessimism. It implies that goods necessitate related evils and God is impotent to do anything about this, either now or in the future. If this is the best of all possible worlds, God is powerless to make a better one or even improve this one.

While not subscribing to the view that this is the best of all possible worlds, we are compelled to recognise an element of truth in Leibniz's argument. Some good things are bound to carry with them unfortunate possibilities. For example, human freedom is bound to be attended by the possibilities of miscalculation and ignorance, not to mention sin. That being the case, it would appear to be impossible to eliminate all suffering and tragedy while retaining the freedom we value.

To take another example, it is to our benefit that the world has a certain fixed order and abides by certain constant laws. This means that the universe can be studied, its laws understood and sciences developed which permit us to cure diseases, overcome natural hazards and create things which improve the quality of life.

On the other hand, those fixed laws mean that when human mechanical contrivances fail, as they may do because of miscalculation or chance, a plane may crash, according to the law of gravity and many passengers may be killed. Yet if God temporarily suspended the law to save the passengers many other people would get into worse trouble.

We hope that natural evil will continue to diminish both through human endeavour and the on-going creative process, but whether we can hope for its total elimination in this kind of world is another question. If we take a realistic view of the world we shall not expect things to be otherwise.

The free-will defence

This approach to the problem argues that God being good wanted to create the best possible universe with the best possible surplus of moral and natural good over moral and natural evil. But God also wanted to create intelligent personal beings who would freely love and obey God. So the world which God created contained neither moral nor natural evil but it did contain beings (angelic and human) with free moral choice.

Free moral choice necessarily involves the possibility that these beings may disobey God and do what is evil, thus bringing suffering on one another. That possibility did indeed become an actuality. All the evil that exists in the world is the result of the bad choices made by the free moral agents whom God created.[6]

According to this view, God is indirectly responsible for the existence of evil in the world, because God could have created personal beings who had no freedom to disobey. However God is not directly responsible for evil because that is the result of the choices of these created beings. What is more, so the argument runs, a world without free beings would have been without sin and evil, but it would have been without good also, because moral good requires that it be freely chosen.

As for natural evil, this theodicy explains that by reference to Satan and his legions. Satan was an angelic spirit who, like humans, used his freedom to rebel against God and to work evil. Natural evils are all Satan's works.

The 'free-will defence' is logically valid and clears God of direct responsibility for evil. It appears to maintain both the omnipotence and the all-lovingness of God. What is more, there is unquestionable evidence that an enormous amount of the suffering and evil which living creatures experience in the world is directly due to the evil that people freely and deliberately choose to do.

Nevertheless it is still open to objections. The argument that Satan is the cause of all natural evil is not convincing. And if God could stop natural evils by binding or abolishing Satan, why does God not use the divine omnipotence to do so? With respect to moral evil we may well ask why God's indirect responsibility for evil should be passed over so lightly. How can we absolve God of responsibility for evil when God has created free personal beings whose freedom was bound to cause havoc, just to suit God's whim of receiving a measure of obedience and worship offered freely?

The Irenaean theodicy

British theologian, John Hick, is the chief modern advocate of this line of argument, which he attributes originally to Irenaeus (130-200).[7]

According to Hick, we must begin with the assumption that God's intention with respect to human beings was to create perfect finite personal beings in filial relationship with their Creator. However, it is logically impossible for human beings to be created already in this state, because such perfection involves coming freely to a consciousness of God and freely choosing the good in preference to evil.

Therefore human beings were created spiritually and morally immature. According to Irenaeus, they were created in the image of God, that is as personal beings, but not yet in the likeness of God, which is to say, not yet perfect. The perfecting of human beings is what God is doing in history. To be sure, God has pronounced the creation good, but in the same sense that we might say that a new-born healthy baby is beautiful and good, without implying thereby that there is no need for the baby ever to develop and grow into an adult.

Thus there are two stages in the creation of humankind in God's image and likeness. The first stage was accomplished by God alone, but the second stage can be completed only through the willing response and co-operation of people themselves. This goal is achieved by overcoming difficulties and temptations and by making right and loving choices in concrete situations.

To achieve this goal, a particular kind of world is called for, namely one that would stimulate development towards personal and moral maturity. Such a world would not be a hedonistic paradise. Rather it would be a world in which there are many tough challenges and the need to stand by one another in compassion and practical care.

Many people who attack theism because of the existence of evil falsely assume that if God created the world it would be like the environment we provide for our pampered household pets where every need is supplied. Hick argues that this would not be the kind of world which would lead to the perfecting of saints. In fact the kind of world required as a vale of soul-making would be precisely the kind of world we have. In the ongoing process through which God is perfecting human beings, it is necessary that the world be a challenging and even dangerous environment containing both natural and moral evil.

Hick admits that this process of person making is not completed on earth and therefore this theodicy requires belief in life beyond death both for the completion of the process and in order that the pain and suffering through which persons have been perfected may be rendered worthwhile by the eternal fellowship with God which is its goal.

The Irenaean theodicy is an interesting one. It picks up elements of the free-will defence theodicy, since it acknowledges that much evil results from the choices of morally imperfect beings. The cornerstone of the argument is that this world is a vale of soul-making and therefore it is quite appropriate that it be a difficult and even dangerous world. Its insight that even a perfectly loving God would not necessarily create a world of ease and luxury is helpful. While some would find its dependence upon the reality of an afterlife for its plausibility a negative feature, in this respect it accords well with traditional Christian doctrine.

Yet it is not totally satisfying. It is too optimistic. The amount of evil in the world, the scale of human atrocities, the extent of natural catastrophes and the suffering they cause are so vast that we are bound to ask whether it is not very much more than is necessary for the purpose of soul-making. What is more, the sufferings seems to fall so indiscriminately and so unevenly on people. Often it appears to be soul-destroying rather than soul-making.

We may well ask, is the method God uses cost effective? Does God's end justify such horrific means? My own view is that it does not. The amount of evil is too great for it to be accounted for in this way, and Hick's defence that however small the amount was people would feel it should be less, is not a satisfactory answer.

What we can learn from the theodicies

No one of the theodicies we have looked at provides an adequate explanation of why so much evil exists in a world created from nothing by an omnipotent and all loving God. All of them have lessons for us and there are surely other points that need to be made as well. To find the most adequate answer to the problem we shall have to pick and choose and put things together from various sources. Let us look at our learnings so far.

1. Evil is no illusion. It is terribly real. But some ways of thinking do magnify evils and we can take steps to correct this. The problem of evil should not be overdone. Though there are things that fill us with a sense of outrage, as John Cobb observes, most people seem to believe that it is better to be born and to live a full life than not to be born at all or to die early.
2. We should not easily abandon the love and goodness of God. Yet we should be honest with God and if we feel outrage it is not wrong to express that outrage to God.
3. Neither should we abandon the omnipotence of God. It can be and needs to be understood in a way that does not necessitate its rejection in order to account for evil.

4. We cannot say that this is the best of all possible worlds. This may not even be a meaningful concept and in any case would mean that no improvements are possible. However, we can say that some aspects of the world which we value and would not want to surrender also have a down side to them. And in a world of this kind, it would seem to be impossible to eliminate all tragedy and suffering.
5. Much of the evil in the world is the result of human freedom and the wrong use of that freedom. Human beings in society contribute much that is good to each other, but also much that is painful and evil. However, free will cannot be the total explanation of all evil and suffering.
6. If God's purpose is to produce spiritually and morally mature individuals, God would not have created a luxury resort world anyway. However, this does not account for the excessive amount of evil in the world. And even the assumption that there is a better life to come cannot legitimise the enormity of human suffering.

Other points to be kept in mind

We need to bear in mind that this world does not yet correspond to God's plan for it. Because of the Genesis account of creation, we are accustomed to think of creation as something completed in the past. We are used to thinking that God first got the world in order, then added animals and people. However, it is impossible to point to an time when the world was complete and static from there on. The world has always been in process of becoming. God's plan of creation is not yet complete. If that is so, we must assume that the world is still being brought to perfection (Romans 8:18-25), and we can have a share in that process.

We need to reflect also about the relationship between death and evil. In spite of the common assumption that physical death is the punishment for the transgression of Adam and Eve (an assumption which a careful reading of Genesis 3:19 and 22 will not support), the evidence suggests that all life on earth moves towards an inevitable natural termination in death. It always has, even before there was any human life on earth.

For personal beings forming deep and abiding relationships, death will always mean sorrow. Yet it is not necessarily evil. It would be better to see it in Barth's terms as part of the shadow-side of existence. What makes it particularly threatening for us is sin and our lack of confidence in God. As Christians, however, we take seriously the gospel of the resurrection. Death does not defeat God. It may put an end to our plans for the future, but not God's. This is a matter we shall look at further in the final chapter.

The cross and human suffering

It is at least surprising that in the theodicies outlined above, the death of Jesus on the cross plays no part at all, and even in longer statements of the theodicies Jesus is scarcely mentioned. Yet the fact that Jesus suffered torture and died an excruciating death at the hands of fellow human beings must have some bearing on this problem.[8]

Of course, if Jesus were just another human being who is tortured and killed by his fellow humans, he is just one more victim and another example of the problem we are dealing with and we can only ask again why God permits such things. But three things make his death different. In the first place, Jesus was not simply a helpless victim. In time of peril, he did not run away to preserve his own life. He accepted the cross and thereby voluntarily identified with all who suffer.

Secondly, we believe that it was the death of the one in whom God was incarnate. Therefore his suffering and dying on the cross was at the same time God's loving act of solidarity with all who suffer without any miraculous divine intervention. As St Paul says to the Romans, 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). So even when we feel forsaken in the midst of troubles we can believe that God is with us and sustains us in our struggle and even in protest.

Thirdly, Jesus' death was followed by the resurrection. As well as being a divine imprimatur on Jesus, this is God's protest against all the evil which brought the crucifixion about. And it is also God's promise - God's commitment (if you like) to continue the struggle against evil until it is no more.

This is not, of course, an intellectual answer to the problem of evil. Perhaps no intellectual answer can be given which does not justify or legitimate evil in some way. But it does help us to see evil and experience it in a different way.

If the cross means that God has identified with us, and is with us, in the midst of evil, then we are also called to mediate God's presence to others in their suffering.[9] Those in the midst of pain and sorrow do not need at that moment an intellectual argument. They need pastoral care of a kind that mediates God's love to them in such a way that they find strength to cope and even to triumph.

Evil as that which God opposes

If cross and resurrection mean that evil is that which God opposes and therefore does not belong in God's creation, this has further important consequences for life and action in this world. World views which see evil as an inevitable part of the world encourage a certain passivity towards it. Christianity, on the other hand,

recognising that it ought not to be, has encouraged a continuing attack upon it. In Western society, this attitude has now become a secularised axiom of our thought, but we ought not to lose sight of the faith that first gave rise to it and still undergirds it.

A realistic view of life

Finally, it needs to be recognised that the church has a responsibility to foster amongst Christians a realistic view of life. Unfortunately, many Christians and others live with a tragically unrealistic view of life. They imagine that people who believe in God, attend church, do no one any wrong and lead a decent life have no troubles, enjoy a long and comfortable life and eventually die in their sleep.

There is a strand of thought in the Hebrew Bible which gives some support to that expectation. It is expressed, for example, in Psalm 1, where the person who delights in the law of the Lord is likened to a tree planted beside a river, which bears fruit in season and whose leaves never whither. The wicked are likened to chaff which is blown away in the wind. As mentioned earlier, the book of Job was written to counter this view.

Of course, Christians may be spared some troubles which others bring on themselves, but on the other hand they take upon themselves troubles in the service of others which worldly hedonists never experience. If we ever expected the life of discipleship to be trouble free, we should consider the life of St Paul (2 Corinthians 11:16-33). In spite of the sufferings he endured, he was convinced that Christ's people could be overwhelmingly victorious through him who loved us (Romans 8:31-39).

A realistic view of life assumes that in a world in which there is much sin, as well as ignorance and error, a world which is not yet as God wants it, things will not always turn out the way we think they should. Life will not always be just. Innocent children will die in tragic circumstances, while rogues live on to a ripe old age. A tyrant like Hitler survives three attempts of his life, while a Martin Luther King is felled by an assassin's first bullet.

In this kind of world, any of us may suffer what we regard as an unfair share of trouble. If that happens, it is easy to become bitter towards God. If we have been encouraged to take a realistic view, we shall be more likely to realise that this is neither God's doing nor God's will. If then we can avoid being filled with bitterness towards God, we shall be in a better position to discover that God does in fact stand by us in the midst of life's tragedies and injustices, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love.

Notes

[1] M.B. Eddy: *Science and Health*, Authorised Edition, 1934, p. 71.

[2] Quoted by Horton Davies: *Christian Deviations*, S.C.M. Press, 1957, p. 36.

[3] Elie Wiesel: *A Jew Today*, Random House, 1978, p. 136, quoted by John K. Roth in Stephen T. Davis, (ed.) *Encountering Evil*, T. & T. Clark, 1981, p. 22. For a fuller description of protest theodicy, see chapter 1 of Davis' book.

[4] E.S. Brightman: *Philosophy of Religion*, Skeffington, 1940. For a more recent and somewhat different presentation of the 'Finite God' theodicy, see David Griffin's 'Creation Out of Chaos and the Problem of Evil' in S.T. Davis, (ed.) *Encountering Evil*.

[5] N. Pittenger: 'Process Theology and the Fact of Evil', in *The Expository Times*, Volume 83, pp. 76f.

[6] For a full statement of this theodicy, see S.T. Davis: 'Free Will and Evil' in *Encountering Evil*.

[7] One of the most complete discussions of the problem of evil, including Hick's proposal, will be found in J. Hick: *Evil and the God of Love*, Macmillan, 1977. A shorter presentation of Hick's proposal can be found in 'An Irenaean Theodicy' in S.T. Davis, (ed.) *Encountering Evil*.

[8] See the excellent article by Richard Bauckham, 'Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann', in *Modern Theology*, 4:1, 1987 pp. 83-97.

[9] See the article by Scott W. Gustafson, 'From Theodicy to Discipleship', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 45, pp. 209-22.

9
Jesus Christ

The person of Jesus Christ is absolutely central to Christian theology. It is the confession which Christians make about him, and the implications which flow from it for every area of belief, which distinguish Christianity from every other religion.

It is not surprising therefore that an enormous amount of attention has been devoted to understanding his significance. Who was he? What is the meaning of his life and the events surrounding it? The attempt to answer these and similar questions and to arrive at a doctrine of Christ is what is usually referred to as **Christology**.

The church has never found an absolutely satisfactory Christology, though it has been the centre of continuous thought and debate. The discussion continues unabated to the present time, and some of the issues seem no nearer to being resolved than ever. Forewarned that we must not be too optimistic about achieving any finality, we must nevertheless attempt to clarify for ourselves as far as we can, the nature and meaning of our confession concerning Jesus Christ.

The historical Jesus

In the first place, we have to affirm that Jesus was an historical person, who lived in a certain geographical locality at a certain time in history. This needs to be said, since from time to time sensational books appear which claim, or attempt, to prove that Jesus is a purely mythical figure. In most instances, such books turn out to be of poor scholarship.[1]

The existence of the Christian movement in the middle of the first century is beyond historical dispute. To account for that movement and the deeds of its adherents, while maintaining that it

was based upon a myth, which its first advocates fraudulently put forward as an historical reality, would be an extremely difficult task.

What is more, we have the documents of the New Testament, written for the most part in the first century, and behind which stands an oral tradition which can be traced back, in some instances, to within a few years of when Jesus lived. The amount of careful, responsible scholarship devoted to this literature and the oral tradition behind it is simply massive - perhaps more than has been devoted to any other body of literature in the world. While some scholars are sceptical at various points, none of them doubts that there was a person called Jesus to whom these accounts relate.

In addition, there are numerous references to Jesus in secular literature of the time.[2] While these references are mostly short and not very informative, they are such as to confirm the biblical evidence for the historicity of Jesus.

When we come to ask what we know for sure about this historical person, we run into much greater differences of scholarly opinion, from Rudolf Bultmann, who was very sceptical about what we can really know, through to conservative scholars who hold quite optimistic views about our knowledge of this historical Jesus.

The quest for the historical Jesus

In the history of thought about the historical Jesus, there are a number of distinct stages and it may be helpful to consider them one by one. In the first place, there was a time when all that the gospels say about Jesus was uncritically accepted as literally true and historically accurate. Thus the Reformers, for example, quoted the deeds and sayings of Jesus from the gospels just as if they were transcriptions of video-tape. Differences of historical detail, such as when Jesus cleansed the temple, were scarcely noted, let alone the considerable differences in the portrait of Jesus presented by the different authors.

Then there followed, particularly from the time of the Enlightenment in Europe, a period of increasing scepticism about the gospel records. This was increased by the application of the methods of literary criticism to the New Testament documents. People began to draw a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. What the New Testament presents to us, it was said, is the Christ of faith. If we want to discover the Jesus of history, it was argued, we have to get back behind this vision of faith to the historical person who inspired it. Paul was often regarded as the chief villain who was largely responsible for overlaying the historical figure of Jesus with dogmatic constructions.

Some scholars started trying to break through the alleged encrustations of doctrine and dogma to get at the historical Jesus.

Many books were written claiming to reconstruct the picture of the Jesus of history. This quest for the historical Jesus, as it came to be called, was at its height at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

While popular books of this genre were still being written much later, the last of the great scholarly works in this field was Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, first published in English in 1910. Another scholar has called this book the memorial and funeral oration of the whole movement - the memorial because of its scholarly brilliance, and the funeral oration since he demonstrated how unsatisfactory the whole quest had been. [3]

The third stage was a pessimistic abandonment of the quest. Schweitzer had shown that with the best intentions and the best scholarship available, still the Jesus of history movement produced only a series of quite different portrayals of Jesus which were just as thoroughly dogmatic and unhistorical as the understanding of Jesus which the movement criticised. Each writer (they were all men) created his own Jesus to suit his own liking and preconceptions. The general recognition of this fact led to an almost total abandonment of any quest for the historical Jesus.

The problem which the quest had failed to solve was twofold. On the one hand, there was, as we have said, the inescapable tendency of every interpreter to project back on to the material about Jesus his own ideas about what Jesus should have been like. On the other hand, there was the fact that the documents were already confessional statements. Bornkamm put it this way: 'We possess no single word of Jesus and no single story of Jesus, no matter how incontestably genuine they may be, which do not contain at the same time the confession of the believing congregation or at least are embodied therein'.[4]

The problem was how to separate the facts from the confession, and how to state them without at the same time colouring them again with some other confession. Indeed there is the more basic question whether there are bare facts about anything. If there are not, the attempt to establish the bare facts about Jesus is bound to fail.

Chastened by this experience, yet not yielding to pessimism, some scholars returned, about the middle of the twentieth century, to the task of trying to determine just what can be established about the Jesus of history. Some people dubbed this renewed effort the new quest of the historical Jesus.

This quest was much more modest and cautious. It did not attempt anything like a biography or life of Jesus. It did not presume, as some participants in the old quest did, that it could get insight into his inner life. It accepted that our knowledge will

be fragmentary and incomplete. Nevertheless, Bornkamm, a representative of the new quest, believed there was no ground for resignation or scepticism. The gospels, he affirmed, do bring before our eyes in glimpses 'the historical person of Jesus with utmost vividness'.[5] In particular, the new questers believed there is no reason why we should despair about recovering the distinctive teaching of Jesus.

There has been no repudiation of Jesus research amongst New Testament scholars since the beginning of the 'new quest'. Indeed such have been the developments that some scholars see present scholarly work to be so different from that of the fifties and sixties that they refer to what is taking place at present as 'the third quest for the historical Jesus'[6].

Others, such as James Charlesworth, reject 'quest' language altogether. He believes that it gives a false picture of what is going on. It suggests someone fumbling around in a dark room to find the door. He believes that a better analogy for what is happening in Jesus research would be to picture ourselves in a dimly lit room, constantly bumping into things that force us to pause to examine what it is we have come across.[7] He does not have a catchy title to replace 'new quest' or 'third quest', but he suggests that it is a matter of being awakened to historical questions by the facts that have thrust themselves upon us.[8]

How did Jesus think of himself?

Perhaps nothing highlights the problem of describing the historical Jesus better than the attempt to answer the question: How did Jesus think of himself? Did he think he was the Messiah? Did he think of himself as Son of God? Or what did he think?

So far as we know, no one asked him those questions. If anyone did, he or she did not leave us a record of the answer. We have no way now of directly probing the mind of Jesus. All we can do is to look at the recorded sayings of Jesus to see whether they give us any clue about how he thought of himself. The difficulty we are faced with here is that the sayings of Jesus in the gospels were not transcribed from a tape-recorder, but were remembered years later, and were set down well after the resurrection and after those who wrote these documents were utterly convinced that he was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Sometimes that conviction of theirs appears to have been read back into what Jesus said at the time.

Son of God and Messiah

Titles with an exalted meaning, such as Messiah (Christ, in the Greek equivalent), and Son of God, rarely occur in the records of

the sayings of Jesus, and even relatively conservative scholars concede that where these occur, it is unlikely that the form of the saying as we have it is as Jesus spoke it. So we cannot simply say, for example, look at Mark 9:41; Jesus refers to himself as Christ, so he must have thought of himself as Messiah.

Even Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi is difficult to interpret. Because of Jesus' reply to Peter in the Matthew version (Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona...), we have become accustomed to thinking that Jesus regarded Peter's answer as a brilliant, God-given insight. When we look at Mark's version, however, we see that Jesus immediately charged Peter (the Greek word even carries the sense of rebuke) not to say that to anyone. Then he went on to speak of his own coming suffering, using for himself a quite different title, namely Son of Man.

Eduard Schweizer draws the conclusion that according to the earliest gospel, 'Jesus was not at all happy about Peter's statement and considered the title of Messiah if not false, at least unsuitable for public acknowledgment'. [9]

Son of Man

The one way of referring to himself which surely does go back to Jesus himself is by means of the term Son of Man. This term occurs almost exclusively in the reported sayings of Jesus, but was not used at all by the early Christian community in speaking about him. With this title we have the problem of what it meant on the lips of Jesus. Was he using the term with the kind of connotation it has in Daniel 7 and the book of Enoch, where it is an exalted title, or was he using it in a quite neutral way as in Psalm 8:4 (RSV) and the book of Ezekiel as a round-about way of saying 'I'?

We cannot answer this question with any certainty. All we can say is that he preferred to use an ambiguous, enigmatic term for himself. Yet his use of any title at all raises a question. Why did he not simply say I? The title Son of Man clearly raises the question, for all who hear it, what we are to make of this man.[10]

Implicit Christology

Since the titles he used tell us little or nothing, it is to Jesus' actions we must look if we want to get some idea of how he saw himself.

There was, first of all, the authority with which Jesus spoke. In the Sermon on the Mount, he sets his own word over against the law of Moses, thus claiming an authority which rivals that of Moses. Jesus' use of 'Amen' before his saying (Matthew 5:18; Mark 9:1; Luke 18:17; John 3:3) is a peculiar usage, all his own. Of this the German scholar, Schlier writes: 'The point of the Amen before Jesus' own sayings is rather to show that as such they are reliable and

true, and that they are so as and because Jesus Himself in His Amen acknowledges them to be His own sayings and thus makes them valid. These sayings are of varied individual content, but they all have to do with the history of the kingdom of God bound up with His person.'[11] He goes on to say that in this usage of Amen by Jesus we have the whole of Christology in a nutshell.

Then there is the way he addresses God as Abba, indicating a filial intimacy with God unheard of before. There is the way in which he offered forgiveness to tax-collectors and sinners, and called people to loyalty to himself, as though he stood in God's place. Many similar things might be listed, but let us conclude with reference to the Last Supper, and note the way in which Jesus takes up some of the most hallowed symbols of the Old Testament and applies them to himself. All of these things point to the fact that Jesus had a definite and exalted view of his own role and significance.

Though he rejected the title Messiah, he had what we might call a messianic consciousness - even a messianic complex were there not some grounds for judging that such consciousness was not inappropriate. Nevertheless, to say all that is not to spell out precisely how he did interpret his own person. Did he regard himself as a great prophet, special messenger from God, the incarnation of some pre-existent being, the embodiment of the divine? These questions are not answerable with any certainty.

The New Testament witness concerning Jesus

Jesus' real humanity

In the first place, the gospels make it clear that Jesus was a fully human person, sharing in the ordinary experiences of human life. He was born, like any other person. He had to grow and learn as all human children do (Luke 2:40, 46). He had at least four brothers, whose names we know (Mark 6:3) and some sisters.

He was known in Nazareth as a carpenter's son, and probably worked as a carpenter himself. He liked to eat and drink (Matthew 11:19). He became weary with physical exertion (John 4:6), and when he was tired he needed to sleep (Mark 4:38). He was deeply distressed at the thought of approaching suffering and death (Mark 14:34), and all the gospels make it clear that he suffered agony on the cross and died as any other tortured human being might die.

We know that Jesus experienced temptation. The gospels themselves do not say that he was sinless. That is said in Hebrews (4:15) and the first letter of Peter (2:22), but just what that means is not easy for us to say. We know that sometimes he became very angry (Mark 3:5; 10:14, John 2:13-17), but no one could

accuse him of any sin (John 8:46) and even Pilate could find no fault in him (Matthew 27:24).

Certainly Jesus had unusual powers. He effected many remarkable healings, yet even these were not such as to convince everyone that he was God's special messenger, and he refused to offer any magical signs. He had an uncanny insight into what was going on in people's minds, but this appears to have been because he had a deep understanding of human nature, rather than because he had some special means of knowledge unavailable to ordinary people. All the evidence points to the conclusion that he had to learn facts by investigation and seeking information as other people do (Mark 6:38).

The resurrection

The resurrection is a key to everything that is said about Jesus in the New Testament. All those who contributed to the biblical witness about Jesus were totally convinced that he had risen from the dead. This fact coloured everything they said. It was not merely that the women, and others, found the tomb empty on the first day of the week, but more importantly Jesus appeared to his disciples a number of times. Even when the appearances ceased, they were utterly convinced that he was alive and 'at the right hand of God'. Immediately they openly proclaimed in Jerusalem that the one so recently crucified had been raised by God from the dead.

There have been many who have suggested that the Easter message is just a product of the faith of the disciples. There is absolutely no evidence that this was the case. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that had there not been some quite astounding intervention, all who had followed Jesus would have returned to their former life in total disillusionment. Bornkamm has expressed the situation well:

> *The men and women who encounter the risen Christ in the Easter stories have come to an end of their wisdom. They are alarmed and disturbed by his death, mourners wandering about the grave of their Lord in their helpless love, and trying like the women at the grave with pitiable means to stay the process and odour of corruption, disciples huddled fearfully together like animals in a thunderstorm. ... One would have to turn all the Easter stories upside down, if one wanted to present them in the words of Faust: 'They are celebrating the resurrection of the Lord, for they themselves are resurrected'.*[12]

Far from manufacturing the resurrection story out of their inner faith, it was the resurrection which revived their faith. Indeed its significance was even greater than that. As in the case of Saul, so

also in the case of the disciples, their experience of the risen Christ was life transforming.

There is, of course, no direct line of argument from 'Jesus is risen' to 'Christ the co-eternal Son of God', but clearly the resurrection profoundly affected their final estimate of who Jesus was. Before long there were some, though not those at the core of the Christian movement, who were turning Jesus into a demi-god who only appeared human but was not really human at all. But those who had lived with him and followed him about Galilee and on to Jerusalem had no doubt about his real humanity.

New Testament titles for Jesus

Though the disciples and those close to them did not wish to undermine the humanity of Jesus, they felt compelled, particularly after the resurrection, to add something to it. To them he was at least a unique man, for in him, they were convinced, God was present and active, as he had been in no other person. They tried to express this in various ways, and one way was by giving to him special titles.

Christ

The most common of these titles was Christ. In fact it was so commonly applied to Jesus that even in the New Testament it became more like a second name than a title. It is the Greek equivalent of Messiah or the anointed. Expectations of the Messiah were running high amongst Jews of Jesus' day. The Messiah they looked for was a God-anointed man who would release the Jews from political bondage, restore the nation to the glory of former times and bring blessings to the Jewish people. It was possibly because there were such firm preconceived notions about the Messiah that Jesus made no use of the term.

In their early preaching in the book of Acts, we see the apostles trying to convince their Jewish hearers that Jesus was the Messiah for whom the people had been looking (Acts 2:36). Some accepted the message and believed, but the majority refused. Once that refusal became firm, and the preaching of the gospel passed more clearly to the Gentiles, the significance of that title declined. The term Christ has continued to be used to this day, but it is commonly thought of as a second name rather than a meaningful title.

The Servant of God

Another title applied to Jesus was the servant of God (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). In the Old Testament, it is David or his successor who is referred to occasionally in this way. More importantly, the title reminds us of the servant of God mentioned in the Servant Songs

of Isaiah 40-55, particularly Isaiah 53. Here is the picture of the servant of God whose acceptance of suffering, wrongfully imposed upon him, brings healing and forgiveness to many.

The early Christian community found this prophecy particularly helpful in explaining the suffering and death of Jesus. To Jewish hearers, this title made an enormous claim for Jesus, but once again it did not speak so eloquently to Gentiles. What is more, it did not express all that was implied in the resurrection of Jesus.

Son of God

Yet another title was Son of God or the Son. These were actually two separate titles, but they naturally tended to be assimilated to each other. In view of Jesus' unique filial relationship with God and his use of the term Abba (Father, or papa) in addressing God, it was very natural that Jesus' relationship to God should have been thought of in terms of sonship. Apart from the gospels, this title is found in Acts 9:20, Hebrews 1:2, 1 John 1:3, Revelation 2:18, and it occurs frequently in the letters of Paul (for example Romans 1:3-4; 8:29,32; 1 Corinthians 15:28; 2 Corinthians 1:19; Galatians 2:20; 4:4-6; Colossians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:10).

This title had the advantage that it was meaningful both to Gentiles and to Jews, but its disadvantage was that all sorts of people had been referred to as sons of God. Anyone who stood in close relationship to God could be called a son of God. Hence it did not really do justice to the uniqueness of Jesus as Christians understood it.

Lord

Perhaps the most important title of all is Lord. One of the earliest Christian confessions of faith seems to have been the statement, Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3). Again it seems to have been Paul who used this title most frequently, perhaps as many as 200 times in the genuine letters of his which have survived.

Since he wrote to congregations in the gentile world, it might be assumed that the title is derived from gentile culture, and it is true that Lord is a title given to the Emperor as well as to the gods of the pagan religions. Hence in claiming the title for Jesus, Christians were claiming for him all that pagans claimed for their gods. In fact Jesus was called Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16), that is, Lord above every other lord.

Yet it may have been from the Hebrew background that the title was derived. Whenever the sacred name of God was met in the Hebrew text, by New Testament times no attempt was made to pronounce it, for it was regarded as too holy to be pronounced by ordinary human lips. Instead, the word *Adonai* (Lord) was

said. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the sacred name was always rendered by *Kyrios*, the Greek word for Lord. (Many English versions also follow the practice of indicating the divine name by LORD printed in capitals). So, it was really a very exalted title.

There is another reason why the title meant so much to Paul. According to the account of his conversion, when he heard the voice on the road to Damascus, he asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' Probably he expected an answer such as, 'I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. Instead he received the reply, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'. So Jesus was Lord. In Philippians 2, after describing the humility of Christ Jesus, Paul says that God has bestowed upon him the name which is above every name, and that every tongue should confess him as Lord.

In the light of this Hebrew background, it can be seen that in giving Jesus the title of Lord Christians were making the most momentous claims for him. So exalted was he that he could be given a title once reserved for God alone.

New Testament Christologies

While the Christology of titles is suggestive, it is necessarily imprecise, but it is not the only form of Christology in the New Testament.

Adoptionism

Perhaps the oldest form of Christology of all is what is called adoptionism. According to this view, Jesus was such a good and obedient man that God adopted him as his son and exalted him to a divine status (Acts 2:36; 10:38; 13:33; Romans 1:3f.). There is some difference on the matter of the point in time when the adoption occurred.

The texts just cited suggested that it occurred at his death and resurrection, but the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the first three gospels (see especially Luke 3:22 margin), in which Psalm 2:7 is quoted (You are my Son, today I have begotten you) would suggest that the adoption occurred at Jesus' baptism. Some groups later developed this into a full and exclusive Christology, but in the New Testament it was always overshadowed and supplemented by more advanced Christologies.

It has never seemed an adequate Christology to the church at large. The gospel which it has found in the New Testament is not that God made use of a good man, when he appeared on the scene, but that God sent the Son into the world that through him it might be saved. To put it another way, the gospel was seen to be not the news that a man made it and became God, but that God became man.

The Virgin Birth

Another attempt to deal with the significance of Christ was through the stories of the virgin birth. This virgin birth Christology is more exalted than adoptionism. The virgin birth itself plays a relatively minor role in the New Testament. Only Matthew and Luke make anything of it at all. John possibly knew this tradition but did not make any use of it. Paul and the other writers apparently knew nothing about it, and developed their estimates of Christ without making any use of this tradition.

The virgin birth cannot by itself establish the incarnation, since the one born in that fashion might still be no more than a special messenger from God, but it goes beyond adoptionism in asserting that the coming of Jesus was by the deliberate will and plan of God. It was not, as adoptionism might suggest, just a fortuitous event of which God took advantage.

Logos Christology

The most exalted Christology in the New Testament is that which is associated with the concept of the Word (*Logos*). We come across this concept at the beginning of the Gospel of John, where he writes, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1:1, 14; see also 1 John 1:1 and Revelation 19:13).

This concept has a double history, Hebrew and Greek. In the Hebrew Bible, the Word of God signified God in action. In Psalm 33:6 we read, 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made'. In the creation story in Genesis 1, God merely speaks the word and each stage of creation comes to be. This is what John had in mind when he wrote, 'All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made' (John 1:3). In Greek, *Logos* meant not only word, but the thought or reason which the word expresses, and then the rational principle which permeates the universe, and the rational faculty in the human person by which the order of the universe is grasped.

Against this background, what John was suggesting in speaking of Christ as the incarnate Word was that in him, enfleshed in a human form, there was present God's self-revealing action and the intelligence which makes all things intelligible. It is only at the beginning of John's Gospel that this term is used at any length in the Scriptures, but Paul (and the Deutero-Pauline author) expressed the same kind of understanding of Jesus' significance when he referred to Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24),[13] 'the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation' in whom

all things were created (Colossians 1:15-20). It is here that we come closest to a doctrine of incarnation, God present in human flesh.

Christological controversies

Precisely because Jesus is so central to Christianity, there has been a great deal of controversy about his nature, some of it at times rather acrimonious.

Ebionites and Docetists

On the whole, the church has tried to steer a middle course between two extremes represented by two early heresies. On the one hand were the Ebionites who insisted on the full and genuine humanity of Christ at the expense of his divinity. They were adoptionists, holding that Christ was simply a man upon whom God had conferred a special status because of the quality of his religious life and his moral obedience.

On the other extreme there were the Docetists whom we have referred to earlier. Just because they were convinced of the divinity of Christ, they refused to concede that he was truly human. They were deeply influenced by the Greek view that the flesh is inherently evil - so evil that it was utterly preposterous, to their way of thinking, to suggest that a divine being could in any way be linked with it.

Popular thought outside the church has tended to be ebionitic. Jesus is mostly respected as a great man, a significant and original teacher, one of the world's great religious geniuses, but no more. Within the church itself, popular belief has always tended to be docetic. The humanity of Christ is not actually denied and yet the flesh of Christ is not taken really seriously. He is not thought of as a genuine and normal man.

Arianism

If the ebionitic and docetic views of Christ have been the parameters of a smouldering and on-going controversy, in the fourth and fifth centuries there occurred a number of controversies which were very acute and heated.

It all began with Arius of Alexandria, whom we met in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity. He believed that Christ was both human and divine in some sense, though close examination of his beliefs would seem to indicate that Arius' Christ was neither truly human nor fully divine.

He taught that the divine Son who was incarnate in Jesus was not co-equal with God, but was a creature, the first-born of all creatures, brought into being by God for the purpose of creating the world.

The issue which his teaching raised was discussed at the Council of Nicea (C.E. 325) and the decision went against Arius. The issue at Nicea was really this: If the Father and the Son are both God, how can God be one? The Council reaffirmed the unity of God, but in such a way that room was left for a differentiation of Father and Son within the divine unity.

Apollinarianism

No sooner had this decision been taken than another issue arose: If Jesus is both God and man, how can he be one Christ? Arius apparently had an answer to this problem, as did his chief opponent, Athanasius, and strangely enough on this they were both in substantial agreement, and both heretical according to a later decision. However, it was not in connection with either of them that the issue came to the fore, but through the teaching of a close friend of Athanasius, Apollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea.

Apollinarius held that the human person consists of three parts, flesh, psyche (or soul) and nous (or mind, spirit), the latter being the part which gives a person individuality. He taught that Christ had a human body of flesh and a human psyche, but that in him the human nous was replaced by the divine Word or Logos. In other words, he achieved a unity of the human and the divine in Christ, to put it crudely, by lopping off part of the humanity and by grafting on in its place the divine part.

This certainly explained how Christ could be one person, but at the expense of his full humanity, for if he lacked a human nous he was not fully human. What is more, it was argued, if the Son did not take upon himself a human nous, he could not have redeemed it, and therefore Christ could not be fully our Saviour.

Apollinarius' doctrine was condemned at a number of councils, but principally by the Council of Constantinople in C.E. 381.

Nestorianism

The next centre of controversy was Nestorius, a monk trained in the school of Antioch, who became Bishop of Constantinople in C.E. 428. He was troubled by the growing practice of referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as *Theotokos* (Mother of God), and when his chaplain preached against the term Nestorius gave him his backing. A violent dispute broke out over the issue with the Alexandrian theologians supporting the use of the term and the Antiochians opposing it.

Nestorius' argument against the term was that Mary was only the mother of Christ's human nature, but not of his divine nature. The Word of God has no beginning, Nestorius argued, he cannot be born, nor for that matter, suffer or die. To many it seemed that

Nestorius was really teaching that there were two quite separate natures in Christ which were never effectively unified, and hence that there were virtually two Christs, a human Christ and a divine Christ. It seemed that the Son merely took a human nature and used it as a ventriloquist uses a doll.

Nestorius' teaching was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in C.E. 431 and Nestorius was removed from his position and sent into exile. The Council declared that there has been effected a union of the two natures, and therefore we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord. Nestorian Christians have continued right through to the present time. They picture the two natures in Christ somewhat after the analogy of oil and water in a container. No matter how much oil and water are shaken together they always remain separate.

Eutychianism

One of the keen opponents of Nestorius was a monk named Eutyches who was head of a large monastery in Constantinople. In contrast to the Nestorians he so emphasised the union of the two natures in Christ that the two seemed to be fused together in a manner which caused the distinctive qualities of each, and particularly the humanity, to be lost.

Eutyches stated his position as follows: I confess that our Lord was of two natures before the union (that is the incarnation), but after the union one nature. That statement is not of itself necessarily heretical, but Eutyches refused to admit that the humanity of Christ was of one substance with ours, so that it would seem that Eutyches thought Christ's human nature underwent some kind of metamorphosis as a result of the union.

The final condemnation of Eutychianism took place at the Council of Chalcedon in C.E. 451. Eutyches was deposed and exiled and Christian orthodoxy was set out in a statement issued by the Council, and known ever since as the Chalcedonian Definition.

The Chalcedonian Definition

> *Following the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and also in humanity; this selfsame one is actually God and actually man, with rational soul and a body. He is of the same essence as we are ourselves as far as his humanity is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these last days, for us and for our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer (Theotokos) in respect of his humanity.*

> *We apprehend this one and only Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten in two natures; without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union; instead the properties of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one person and in one hypostasis. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.*

The Chalcedonian Definition did not fully satisfy the church. It settled the issue, for the time being, by stating what the church rejected with regard to Christological doctrine, and provided a set of words to define acceptable teaching, but it did not show how these words could be made genuinely meaningful. The church has been struggling with this problem ever since.

Leontius of Byzantium

A significant contribution towards resolving the problem just mentioned was made by Leontius of Byzantium (c. 543), about whom very few personal details are known. Leontius' theory is known as the doctrine of **enhypostasia**. To understand it fully we would need to have a good grasp of Aristotelian metaphysics, but put as simply as possible, what Leontius argued was that in Christ the human nature had no hypostasis of its own but it was enhypostatised in the hypostasis of the Son. What this means in ordinary language is that the human nature which Christ assumed was abstract or general and its particularity and concreteness was supplied by the Logos.

This was possible, according to Leontius, because the divine Word has within himself all the perfections of humanity and more, just as human nature includes all that belongs to animal nature and more, or just as some high dignitary might fill a lower office simultaneously with his own since his own encompasses all that is in the lower office and more.

Leontius' Christology has never been ruled heretical and still finds support at the present time, but many theologians have expressed uneasiness about it. Bonhoeffer maintained that in the enhypostasia theory 'docetism had already slipped back into the orthodox dogma of the ancient church in a refined form'[14]. For if Jesus is not allowed his own human hypostasis, that is to say, if he has no mode of existence of his own, but his concrete personal existence is the existence of God, then God has not really assumed our humanity at all, and the humanity of Jesus is not the same as ours.

I try to get at what Leontius' doctrine means by asking whom we expect to meet in heaven. Of course we would expect to meet

the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but do we also expect to meet Jesus? If Leontius is right, there is no Jesus to meet. Once the Son is no longer incarnate there ceases to be any enduring human being. All that remains is general, unpersonalised human nature. We could not even say that the Son took to heaven with him our human nature, at least nothing he did not already have in common with human nature in its completeness.

The Reformation and the modern period

Luther

The Reformers added little that was new to the understanding of Christ. Luther accepted the Chalcedonian Definition and subscribed to the view that Christ's human nature was impersonal. His main contribution to the discussion was the application to Christology of the idea of **communicatio idiomatum**, the communication of the properties of each of the natures to the other, and hence to the whole person.

This meant that Luther's doctrine of Christ emphasised the unity of the two natures after the manner of the Alexandrian theologians. However Luther did not approach the problem as a speculative theologian. It was the religious issue, the question of salvation which most concerned him.

The other feature of Luther's Christology was his warm emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Luther found a great attractiveness in the man Jesus, and always advised people who wished to know God to begin with Christ as a man, and then be led on to the divine. This he saw as Scripture's way:

> *Scripture begins very gently by leading us first to Christ as to a man and afterwards to the Lord of all creation and finally to a God. Thus I come in easily and learn to know God. Philosophy and the wise men of this world, however, want to begin at the top and have become fools in the process. One must begin at the bottom and afterwards rise up.*[15]

Reformed Christology

Calvin was also anti-speculative in his Christology, and like Luther also, he held firmly to the orthodox definitions. However, unlike Luther, Calvin saw a great gulf between humanity and God, and he even went so far as to suggest that even if sin had not entered, there would have needed to be an intermediary between God and humankind. Consequently when Calvin came to Christology he emphasised the distinction of the two natures, leaning towards the Antiochian school, of which Nestorius was a product.

So much did Reformed Christology insist on the transcendence of the second person of the Trinity over the human nature of Christ in the incarnation that it was argued that though the Word fully united with the human nature, it was not fully contained within it. To use a crude illustration, the Word was to the incarnate Christ as the Pacific Ocean is to Botany Bay. Though the ocean totally fills and constitutes the bay, its vastness totally exceeds the bay, and so exists outside it as well as within it. Lutherans referred to this doctrine as the 'extra Calvinisticum' or the 'Calvinist outside'.

Wesley also accepted the orthodox definitions and avoided being drawn into Christological controversies. His real interest was in the saving significance of Christ and he always made speculative concerns strictly subsidiary to this.

Some modern Christologies

In recent times, a more speculative interest in the person of Christ has re-emerged, not as an end in itself, but because practical life issues cannot forever be separated from more theoretical questions. There have been far too many lines of thought even in the present century for us to be able to deal with them all here, but several of the more important ones will be selected as representative of the variety of thought on this subject.

Kenotic Christology

The first of these is the Christology based upon the idea of **kenosis**. The verb *kenoo* in Greek means to empty. In Philippians 2:7 it is said that Christ 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness'. The idea found here was taken up and developed into a full Christological theory in Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century and it was also adopted by a number of British theologians.

The theory sought to do two things. Firstly it tried to explain how Christ could be the incarnation of God and yet not be omniscient or omnipresent, that is, how he could share, as he obviously did, many of our human limitations yet still be the incarnation of God. Secondly it sought to get beyond the rather static view of the incarnation suggested by the Chalcedonian Definition.

The theory argued that in becoming incarnate the eternal Son voluntarily relinquished certain of his powers and properties in a process of self-emptying or kenosis, and hence it became known as the Kenotic Theory. It was not suggested that the Son divested himself of all divine characteristics. He retained his moral attributes of truth and love, but not his physical attributes of omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence.

In so far as the theory reflected Paul's concern in Philippians 2:5f., it contained something of permanent value. Donald Baillie indicates its value by saying that it apparently enables us to combine a full faith in the deity of Jesus Christ with a completely frank treatment of his life on earth as a human phenomenon, the life of a man.[16]

Yet in spite of their intention to maintain the full and genuine humanity of Jesus, kenotic theories so far have failed to do so. They still make the Logos, though in self-limiting form, the personalising centre of Jesus' being, while the human nature of Christ remains impersonal. In other words, on the crucial issue of the relationship of the two natures in Christ they make no advance on Leontius' Christology.

There are other criticisms also which we need not go into here, but in spite of the criticisms certain conclusions to which the kenotic theory points us cannot be gainsaid: [1] Christ's life on earth was fully and unequivocally human. Jesus was a true human being, a Jewish man of the first century. His human life was characterised by many of the limitations common to us all. [2] In Jesus, God was truly and uniquely present, so that Jesus is rightly the object of faith and worship. [3] Therefore some kind of kenosis or divine self-limitation in the incarnation is inescapable.

Dorner's Christology

Just when the Kenotic Theory was being propounded, another German theologian was putting forward a Christology with some similarities. This was Isaac Dorner (1809-1884) who wrote a five volume work under the title *The Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*.

Dorner began from the presupposition that divinity and humanity are not opposites but that there is some similarity and overlap. In the human person, there is that which is infinite, at least in the form of a receptivity to the divine. It is this receptiveness which made it possible for Jesus to be 'the adequate personal organ of Deity'.

Next, Dorner argued that the right way to get at the unity of the God-human is not to begin from either or both natures separately, but from their union as a given fact. The Logos, who is the principle of revelation and self-bestowal in God, joins with human nature, not as sinful and defiled, but as new humanity, destined to be head of a race of redeemed people.

The special element in Dorner's Christology was that he saw the unity thus created as dynamic and developing, rather than as complete from the beginning. If Jesus was truly human, he must have grown and developed as other humans do. But the divine

Logos would only come to its full incarnational potential in fully developed human nature. So Dorner argued that there must have been a development in the God-humanity correlated with the growth in the human side of his being. Thus the incarnation should not be thought of as at once completed, but as continuous, God as Logos ever appropriating such new aspects of Jesus' being as were generated by his human development.

On the other hand, the growing receptiveness of the humanity of Jesus would have combined consciously and voluntarily with ever new aspects of the logos. Dorner did not see this simply as an ever deepening personal fellowship between Jesus and God, as might be the case with any human being. 'The Logos', he wrote, 'is from the beginning united with Jesus in the deepest bases of being, and the life of Jesus was Divine-human at every point, inasmuch as a receptiveness never existed for the Deity without its fulfilment.'[17]

Dorner's theory protects the full and genuine humanity of Christ while maintaining a truly incarnational Christology. It overcomes the notion of human divine natures as two things which somehow have to be made to occupy the same space at the same time and resolves the problems the Kenoticists were struggling with in a better way. However, the theory would seem to require the extra Calvinisticum of Reformed theology to make comprehensible what was going on for the Logos in the process.

Baillie's Christology

In his classic work, *God Was In Christ*, Donald Baillie has himself made an important Christological proposal. He begins by observing that the mystery of the relation of deity to humanity in Christ must always remain a mystery. That does not mean that nothing can be said about it, but that an element of paradox will always remain. Baillie goes on to observe that numerous Christian thinkers have made use of the category of paradox with respect to various aspects of the faith, one example being the idea of creation out of nothing.

Most illuminating for Christology, Baillie believes, is what he refers to as the paradox of grace. This paradox is expressed in Paul's words, 'I worked harder than any of them, - though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me' (1 Corinthians 15:10). This paradox is also expressed in Harriet Auber's hymn, *Our blest Redeemer*, in the verse which says:

And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone.

Baillie clarifies the paradox as follows: 'From the historical and psychological standpoint the good actions of a Christian are purely his own actions ... And yet ... whatever good there is in our lives and actions ... is all of God: and it was [God's] before it was ours.'[18] Baillie sees this as the deepest paradox of our Christian experience, and peculiar to Christianity, a distinctive product of the religion of the Incarnation. Baillie believes that this paradox in fragmentary form in our own Christian lives, is a reflection of that perfect union of God and humanity in the Incarnation.

Baillie's proposal has some merit. It safeguards the genuine humanity of Jesus while preserving the element of mystery in the Incarnation. The concept of paradox, however, is a rather difficult one. The problem is how to distinguish a genuine paradox from an illogical and impossible contradiction. Once paradox is allowed, what is to stop anyone from putting forward the most absurdly contradictory notions justifying them with the claim that they are a paradox?

In the case of the paradox of grace, the distinction is made on the basis that although it is contrary to our reason, it is indubitably our experience. In applying the paradox to Christ we can hardly claim that it is justified by our experience. What is more, in equating the manner of God's presence in Christ with God's presence in other people the uniqueness of Christ is undermined. Inevitably the difference between Christ and other people is reduced to one of degree only, a conclusion which orthodoxy has resisted, though many people are prepared to accept it. As one critic has put it, 'God acts in the saints; but "God was in Christ" ... We are made [children] of God by the grace of adoption, but we receive this grace through him who is the Son of God by nature'.

There is another way of making what is essentially the same point. The paradox of grace in the life of the Christian has always been understood in terms of the presence and work of the Spirit, a point underlined in Auber's hymn quoted by Baillie, which is a hymn to the Holy Spirit. Applied to Christ, what this paradox would suggest is that he is the incarnation of the Spirit, not the Son, that the Spirit was in him more fully, but not essentially differently, than in us.

Process Christology

Another approach to the Christological problem which has become popular again recently is through the concept of evolution. This approach is not new. It goes back into the nineteenth century, and may even be regarded as having its origins in the thought of Irenaeus, who saw creation as an on-going process whose ultimate consummation and glory are seen in Jesus Christ. It has received

new impetus from what is known as **Process Theology** and from the writings of priest, scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin.

While the theory of evolution propounded by Darwin may be open to some questions, it cannot be denied that all things are involved in process. Reality is not static, and there are indications that in some respects at least the process is one of development. Certainly the belief in a Creator God whose providential care extends to all God's works confirms the faith that God is working the divine purposes out in the creation. The process is interpreted by some people in terms of chance and random change, or in terms of some kind of impersonal urge within things themselves, but by faith it can be interpreted also as God's continuing creative activity.

Norman Pittenger, one of the prominent process theologians, makes use of the concept of the Logos (Word) which he defines as 'the self-expressive principle of God at work in the whole creation'. At one point that Logos comes to unique expression in the life of one man - Jesus Christ. Pittenger describes the total event of Jesus Christ as 'an occurrence of crucial and decisive importance. It reveals the divine reality in its way of acting, which is the way of pure unbounded love' and it inserts a 'new potentiality' into the on-going creative movement, into which others may enter by surrender or commitment.[19]

The process theologians deny that their position is a new form of adoptionism. It is not, as John Robinson has put it, a case of God waiting on the sidelines for an adequate person to turn up. The Logos of God has been in the process from the start, and at that one point erupts, as it were, rather than breaking in from outside. There is some discussion amongst process theologians on whether Christ represents simply a culmination or whether he represents something new - a new creative act. Pittenger opts for continuity and culmination, though he argues that continuity is compatible with the emergence of genuinely novel events and occurrences.

Here lies the crux of the problem with evolutionary views. If the emergence of Christ represents a new act of creation, the likeness of his humanity to ours is in question. If, on the other hand, one opts with Pittenger for continuity and culmination, then no matter how much one protests the matter, the difference between Christ and other people is again simply one of degree.

These are just four examples of recent attempts at Christological reconstruction. There are many others. The present time is for Christology, as for many other doctrines, an era of great ferment. Generally speaking, the Chalcedonian Definition in some sense still provides the ground rules for Christological thought, though it is widely agreed that the concepts and categories with which

the early classical theologians worked are no longer adequate for us. To them the two natures, human and divine, appeared as two objects, like billiard balls, which somehow had to be made to sit on the one spot at the same time. We have come to recognise that what we are confronted with in Christ is not two things called natures, but two orders of reality which are quite different.

Even so, we have not found a finally acceptable solution to the how of the conjunction of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. Perhaps the question how is not even a proper question with which to approach the Incarnation. If the Word became flesh, it must necessarily be the greatest miracle. Nevertheless, in the pursuit of understanding, we are bound to go on asking the question, even if in the end all we can say is: We don 't know, but it is something like the paradox of grace (or whatever analogy we find most illuminating).

At the same time, whatever analogy we use or whatever theory we hold, we can join with Christians of every time and place in affirming both that Jesus was truly and magnificently human, that in him God was uniquely present, and that these two orders of being were present in him in such a way that his humanity was in no way truncated nor the divinity in any way compromised.

He deigns in flesh to appear
Widest extremes to join:
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all divine:
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below.[20]

Notes

[1] One of the most recent claims that Jesus never existed was made by G. A. Wells, a professor of German, in his book, *Did Jesus Exist?*, Elek/ Pemberton, 1975. Though Wells makes a serious and well informed attempt to prove Jesus never existed, his argument fails. For a summary, see J. Ziesler: *The Jesus Question*, Lutterworth Press, 1980.

[2] See, for example, J. H. Charlesworth: *Jesus Within Judaism*, Doubleday, 1988, chapter 4.

[3] G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1960, p. 13.

[4] G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 14.

[5] G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 24.

[6] M. J. Borg: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper San Francisco, 1994, p. 28.

[7] J. H. Charlesworth: *Jesus Within Judaism*, pp. 9-10.

[8] For a fuller description of the 'quest for the historical Jesus' movement, see W. Barnes Tatum: *In Quest of Jesus - A Guidebook*, S.C.M. Press, 1983.

[9] E. Schweizer: *Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1971, p. 15.

[10] For a succinct discussion of the possible meaning of the term 'Son of Man', see John Ziesler: *The Jesus Question*, pp. 42-47.

[11] G. Kittel, (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol.1, Eerdmans, 1964, p. 338.

[12] G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 84.

[13] In Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-27 and Ecclesiasticus 24:24-27 Wisdom is personified and perhaps even regarded as a distinct subsistence in the Divine nature. It is said that Wisdom existed before creation. The treatment of Wisdom in these Hebrew Scriptures clearly suggests to Paul a way in which Christ may be understood. There are similarities between this concept of Wisdom and the Logos referred to by the author of the Fourth Gospel. The Johannine use of Logos and the Pauline use of Wisdom (*Sophia*) represent the most daring Christological speculation in the New Testament.

[14] D. Bonhoeffer: *Christ the Center*, Harper and Row, 1966, p. 81.

[15] Quoted by P. Althaus in *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, 1966, p. 186n.

[16] D. Baillie: *God Was In Christ*, Faber & Faber, 1948, p. 95.

[17] I. Dorner: *System of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 3, p. 328, quoted by H. R. Mackintosh: *The Person of Christ*, T. & T. Clark, 1913. p. 274.

[18] D. Baillie: *God Was In Christ*, pp. 116-117.

[19] N. Pittenger: 'The Doctrine of Christ in Process Theology' in *The Expository Times*, October 1970, pp. 7f.

[20] A hymn of Charles Wesley, *The Methodist Hymn Book* No. 142 (*AHB* 229).

10
The mission of Christ

The theological treatment of the significance of Jesus Christ is usually divided into two sections, the first entitled **The Person of Christ** and the second **The Work of Christ**. The first of these has been dealt with in the previous chapter. The second we turn to now with the question: What was Christ's mission in the days of his life and death in Palestine?

The biblical view of Christ's mission

The Acts of the Apostles

It is not possible for us to deal with every single author but we can survey the main books. We commence with the book of Acts. Recent scholarship has cautioned us against thinking too confidently that we can find here an accurate record of the earliest Christian preaching, but, with regard to the mission of Christ, the ideas expressed in the early speeches do seem to have a primitiveness about them which suggests that we may really have here the earliest stages in the development of the doctrine.

The speeches in chapters 2 and 3 pass very quickly over his life and teaching and lay their stress on the resurrection and exaltation. These demonstrate that human judgment is reversed by the judgment of God: 'God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36). When the hearers respond and ask what they should do, they are offered forgiveness upon repentance, and baptism in the name of Jesus as a sign thereof. Salvation is by faith in his name (Acts 3:16). Christ's mission is to be a sign which turns people to God in repentance.

Already his death is seen as being much more than just a tragedy at the hands of ignorant and wicked people; he was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). His death is even interpreted explicitly in terms of the Servant of Isaiah 53 (Acts 3:13).

However, the emphasis does not fall on the death of Christ. Even in Paul's speech in chapter 13, the emphasis is on the resurrection. It is not said that Jesus died to make forgiveness possible, but that through him it is proclaimed. In fact, forgiveness is offered there in much the same way that Jesus offered it, according to the gospel accounts of his ministry.

The gospels

When we turn to the gospels, we find a much greater emphasis on the death of Christ. However, we should not assume too hastily that the amount of space devoted to the passion and death of Christ indicates a proportional doctrinal interest. The passion narratives served many purposes, not least of which was the apologetic one of answering the question: How is it that one who was crucified as a common criminal could be proclaimed as Christ? But there is considerable doctrinal interest in the cross, and it is indicated in a number of ways.

There is the emphasis that the death of Jesus was in fulfilment of Scripture (for example Mark 14:21). Associated with this is the fact that Jesus repeatedly foretold his own suffering and death. What is more, Jesus is exhibited as consciously fulfilling the prophecies, particularly those related to the Suffering Servant. Hence his death is understood in the gospels to be vicarious. ('For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Mark 10:45)

The sayings associated with the Last Supper are of great significance. Amongst these sayings the following allusions may be found:

1. An allusion to the Jewish sacrificial system in general. Hence it is implied that Jesus' death was expiatory, that is that it blotted out the sins of people more effectively than animal sacrifices.
2. An allusion to the Paschal Lamb of Exodus 12. Hence it is suggested that the death of Christ frees people from their sin as the Israelites were freed from their bondage in Egypt.
3. The sacrifice, and particularly the blood, by which the Mosaic Covenant was ratified (Exodus 24). In association with this, there is an allusion to the New Covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 33. Hence the death of Jesus is seen as the means by which God concludes a new covenant with people, in which God's law is written in their hearts.

Another theme in the synoptic gospels is that Christ's mission is to do battle with the powers of evil and defeat them. Hints of this theme come out in sayings such as 'But this is your hour, and the power of darkness' (Luke 22:53), and 'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Luke 11:20). But, more especially, it is to be found in one of the major motifs of the gospels: the conflict of Jesus with demons, authorities and rulers, and his ultimate victory and vindication in the resurrection.

The gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus are important for discovering their understanding of Christ's mission. These accounts are not just long prefaces to the story of Jesus' trial and death. Of particular significance is the account of Jesus' sermon at Nazareth. Though it is recorded by Luke alone, it could stand as an interpretation of the ministry of Jesus in all three synoptic gospels. Through the text from Isaiah which he chose, Jesus made it clear that his mission was to be God's messenger, proclaiming by both word and action the good news of God's grace and sovereignty. For these writers, the life of Jesus of Nazareth was from beginning to end God visiting and redeeming his people.

John's Gospel

In the Gospel of John, we find a somewhat different approach to the understanding of the mission of Jesus. Here the emphasis is taken off the cross, as the point of atonement, and spread over the entire Christ-event, from incarnation to exaltation. To be sure, the cross is a climax. It is through death that Christ is glorified and exalted, and it is through the glorification of the Son by the Father that the world is judged, but for John, the cross could not stand alone as the foundation of a doctrine of salvation.

For John, the incarnation itself was of utmost significance. He emphasised very strongly the true divinity and true manhood of Christ. In both the first epistle and the gospel there is strong anti-docetic teaching. To deny that Christ has come in the flesh is a sign of the Anti-Christ. Yet there is just as much emphasis on the fact that the incarnation is a real coming of God. What God was, the Word was and the Word became flesh (John 1:1, 14 N.E.B.). In him was the light and life of God.

Because he took both poles of the incarnation so seriously, John found great saving significance in it. Salvation is to know and to have fellowship with God. But no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made God known (John 1:18). So the incarnation itself has great saving significance because it is the means of God's self-disclosure.

For the same reason, the life and ministry of Jesus were of much greater importance to John than is usually conceded. For John, the miracles which Jesus performed were signs. They were a very important part of the revelation by which we may come to know God through the Son, and find life in his name.

The cross was the crowning moment of the revelation, the sign that took up into itself all signs. It was through this that Christ had power to draw the world to himself. But it also liberated Christ for a wider and greater work. The incarnation, important as it was, also constituted a binding and limiting of the Son, but by his death Christ entered upon a wider work of enlightenment, through the Spirit (John 16:7). By it he also entered upon his work as intercessor: 'If any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father' (1 John 2:1). So for John, the work of Christ went well beyond what Jesus accomplished by his ministry on earth.

When it comes to speaking of appropriating what is offered to us in Christ, John avoids the noun *faith*, but uses the verb *to believe*. It is the Son or his name that we believe in, rather than anything specifically associated with his death. Life in Christ is appropriated also by abiding in him. He seems to have in mind a kind of faith-union with Christ. Salvation comes to the believer by cleaving to, and identifying with Christ, who, by his death and exaltation, is ever present to the believers as their ever living Mediator.

The Letters of Paul

Paul understood the mission of Christ as being primarily to deal with the sin that had established itself in human flesh. That is why the Son of God came in the flesh, for it was only there that the foe could be met and defeated. That is, at least in part, the reason he had to die, that he might meet death and defeat it.

New Testament scholar, John Knox, has isolated five distinct images or analogies by means of which Paul explained how Christ procured salvation for sinful people. They are as follows:

1. Jesus paid a ransom for us and thus released us from the slavery of sin.
2. He satisfied the requirements of the law for us and also paid a penalty we could not pay.
3. He offered a complete sacrifice for our sins, such as we were unable to offer.
4. He fought and defeated the powers of evil which held us in their grip and from which we could not break free.
5. Through his perfect obedience to the Father, he became the New Man, undoing the results of Adam 's transgression and making it possible for us to be incorporated into a new and sinless humanity.[1]

Knox goes on to say:

It will be at once apparent that Paul is not using these images to designate five distinct effects of one event or transaction. Christ's act was one act, and its effect was one effect (though with two sides: to free us from sin and to reconcile us to God, to offer emancipation and forgiveness). The images are, certainly in part, metaphors; they represent Paul's effort, by using every analogy which ordinary experience presented, to make vivid and clear the reality of the salvation offered in Christ.[2]

The multiplicity of images which Paul used shows that he realised that no language drawn from human experience could adequately describe the nature of the salvation effected in Jesus Christ, nor the process of its achievement. Compared with all human realities, it is more complex. The best we can do is to look at it from various points of view and try to find analogies, more or less adequate to the particular aspect we are viewing.

Paul's language indicates that for him also, while the cross was singularly significant for a doctrine of atonement, the incarnation, the life of obedience, and the victory of the resurrection were also very important. Salvation was effected not just by one part of the life of Christ, nor by any one action alone, but by what can only be called the entire Christ-event.

It should be noted that for Paul also there was a corporateness about humanity and that, as a result of Christ's life, death and resurrection, a change has occurred in the human situation. One can even say that the whole cosmic situation has been changed. An event has occurred in Christ whose effect is already being felt, and which will, in the end, result in the redemption of the whole creation (Romans 8:18-25; Colossians 2). Consequently, no doctrine which sees the mission of Christ, or the salvation he effected, purely in individualistic terms can adequately reflect the mind of Paul.

From the New Testament to Anselm

In the Apostolic Fathers, surprisingly little emphasis is placed on Christ's passion and death. Of course reference to the saving significance of the death is present, but on the whole the emphasis falls on the impartation of knowledge and the bestowal of new life and immortality. That was what Christ came to do. The idea of salvation through enlightenment and the impartation of knowledge was prominent also in the work of the second century Apologists. The mission of Christ was understood as much in terms of what he taught as what he did.

In the thought of Origen (c. C.E. 200), this understanding of Christ's mission was prominent also. There were many aspects to

Origen's doctrine of salvation, but for him the most important work of Christ, and the noblest, is to be located in the area of enlightenment and the restoration of rationality. 'Happy are they', he says, 'who no longer need the Son of God as a physician who heals the sick, nor as a shepherd, nor as redemption, but as wisdom and as word, and as righteousness'.[3] After the time of Origen, however, the theory of redemption by enlightenment lost support and practically disappeared.

Irenaeus (C.E. 130-200) emphasised the view that Christ's mission had been to inaugurate a new and perfect humanity as opposed to the imperfect, sinful humanity of Adam, so that by solidarity with Christ through faith we might all participate in this new humanity. In Irenaeus and in Athanasius also, one hears again and again the slogan: 'He became what we are in order to enable us to become what he is'. The Word became human so that we might be deified.

The idea of Christ as the victor over the powers of evil was also prominent in this early period. While it was hardly ever the dominating view of Christ's mission, it played a subsidiary role in the thought of people as diverse as Justin Martyr, Origen and Athanasius.

Interest in the death of Christ as the focus of Christ's saving work developed steadily until by the fourth century it clearly surpassed in importance all other views. A theory of atonement based on the cross was never entirely absent, even in the work of Irenaeus, Origen and Athanasius, but from the fourth century on it was Christ's death as a sacrifice offered to the Father which dominated thinking about the means of our salvation.

At the same time, certain new ideas were coming into vogue. From the time of Tertullian, about the beginning of the third century, there began to develop the concept of merit. Just as bad deeds accumulated guilt, a kind of debt towards God, so it was thought that good deeds that went beyond the call of duty and obedience could result in the accumulation of merit, as a kind of credit with God.

Cyprian, about the middle of the third century, suggested that very good people, such as the saints and martyrs, might even accumulate more merit than they needed to off-set their sins, and that superfluous merit might be transferred to others.

St Anselm (C.E. 1033-1109) eventually wove these and other ideas together into a theory of atonement of great originality and rationalistic clarity. The theory was set out in a book entitled *Cur Deus Homo*? (Why Did God Become Man?).

According to his theory, usually referred to as the satisfaction theory, Anselm explained that sin robbed God of honour, and

therefore satisfaction must be made or a penalty paid. So great was the debt the sinner owed God that it deserved the penalty of death. What is more, even if the debt were small, no one is capable of paying it, since no one has anything over and above what he or she already owes God, since we all owe God our total obedience.

But what no ordinary person can do, the God-man, Jesus, could do. Because he was totally obedient all through his life, he was not in debt to God; his self-sacrificing death therefore deserved some reward from God. Because of the great worth of Christ's person, the sacrifice of his life was immeasurably great and deserved an infinite reward. Since he had no need of the reward of merit he thus received, he made it over to those for whom he died. Thus by faith every person may draw on that infinite store of accumulated merit to discharge his or her debt to God.

Anselm's theory was characterised by its singleness of direction and rational coherence. It had two great values: it treated sin as a matter of gravity which could not be dismissed with the wave of the hand, and it used terms and imagery which were very real to people who lived in a feudal society and knew the consequences of doing anything to dishonour their feudal lord.

Anselm's theory also had the apparent value of clarifying an area of doctrine which seemed confused. However, it had many disadvantages not least of which was the fact that it swept aside the many images and analogies which characterised the New Testament description of Christ's saving work. It isolated the death of Christ from the resurrection; it had nothing to say about a work of salvation in the person, as distinct from between the person and God, and it was a thoroughly individualistic theory. Nevertheless, it soon came to dominate the theological scene and continued to do so until the time of the Reformation and beyond.

The Anselmian theory did not, of course, win universal acceptance. No sooner had it been propounded than it was attacked by Peter Abelard (or Abailard, 1079-1142). For Abelard, Christ was simply the great teacher and example. He achieved reconciliation by arousing a deep responsive love in people, which not only turned them back towards God, but which God also regarded as meritorious. In this connection, Abelard quoted Luke 7:41-47 which could be summed up in the epigram, Much is forgiven to them that love much.

Abelardian-type theories of Christ's saving work are called subjective or moral influence theories. They have as many weaknesses as the Anselmian theory. They make even less of the resurrection and the incarnation than Anselm did. They also abandon the rich biblical tradition with its many images and metaphors, and they are equally individualistic.

Their advantage is that they see salvation as something effected in people and not simply outside them, and they recognise that the cross itself and the preaching of the cross have their own peculiar power.

The Reformation

All notions of transferable merit were anathema to the Reformers. Still they did not reject the Anselmian doctrine outright. They modified it. In addition, they rediscovered the rich world of New Testament imagery in relation to Christ's saving work.

According to Luther, it is because of Christ alone that we are justified. To be sure righteousness comes by faith, but it is not because of faith, but because of Christ. The 'because of Christ' involves at least three things. In the first place, there is the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ from the manger to the cross, by which the believer's sins are covered and blotted out.

Secondly, this phrase refers to the fact that Christ, though perfectly righteous in himself, suffered as a sinner in our place and so made satisfaction to God for our sins.[4]

Thirdly, the phrase refers to Christ's victory over the tyrants, the principalities and powers. It is the emphasis on this victorious aspect of Christ's mission which is so characteristic of Luther's thinking. For the believer, this victory of Christ is of the greatest consequence. 'To the extent that Christ rules by his grace in the hearts of the faithful, there is not sin, or death, or curse. But where Christ is not known, there these things remain.'[5]

Luther was well aware that, in spite of Christ's victory, the tyrants are still in the world, and therefore Christ's battle is not ended. The tyrants still afflict the faithful, so that they can only remain victorious by constantly grasping Christ through faith, so that Christ may continually defeat the tyrants in their hearts.

The threefold office of Christ

Calvin's particular and original contribution to the understanding of the mission of Christ was his doctrine of the threefold office. Calvin points out that the word Messiah means anointed, and in the Old Testament three types of people were anointed (at least in some instances). They were prophets, kings and priests. Christ, as God's anointed One, can be understood as fulfilling all three offices.

Jesus is the great prophet because of the perfect teaching that he gave. His perfect doctrine puts an end to all prophecies. Nothing can be added to his gospel. What is more, he is our wisdom; in him 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3).

Christ's kingship, of course, is spiritual, not worldly. As far as the faithful are concerned, Calvin interprets Christ's kingship in terms of his care for his people: 'Thus it is that we may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold ... and other troubles - content with this one thing: That our King will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph'.[6] So far as the rebellious are concerned, his kingship means that he is judge.

As priest, Christ is the one who reconciles us to God and intercedes for us. When Calvin deals with how Christ reconciles us to God and redeems us, there is great variety in his thought. There are echoes of Anselm's theory, for sometimes sin appears in Calvin as a debt to be paid, which only Christ can pay. Sometimes, Calvin understands Christ's death by analogy with the Old Testament sacrifices. Sometimes, like Luther, he pictures Christ as doing battle with the enemies - death, sin and the powers of world and air - defeating them for us. There are even occasions when he speaks like Abelard of the influence upon us of Christ's sacrificial action.

In addition to these ideas, prominent in the thinking of Calvin is the idea of substitutionary suffering. This means that Christ stepped into our place and took upon himself the punishment rightly due to us. This is a different idea from Anselm's, though the two are not far apart.

Calvin emphasises that, throughout the work of reconciliation, the initiative is with God and his love. The sacrifice of Christ and his acceptance of the punishment due to us sinners, does not change God's attitude. It was precisely because God loved us and wished to redeem us that God gave the Son to do this for us. Sometimes Calvin does speak carelessly and inconsistently as though God's attitude were changed, but this is not in accordance with his specific statements which firmly anchor his doctrine in the love of God.

From Wesley to the present

Wesley's doctrine of atonement was very similar to Calvin's and he regarded it as being of decisive importance. In a letter to Mary Bishop he wrote: 'Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the Atonement. It is properly the distinguishing point between Deism and Christianity'.[7]

Like Calvin, sometimes Wesley suggests that the work of atonement made a difference in God's attitude, but alongside such expressions there is a tremendous emphasis on the immense and unconfined grace of God ('So wide it never passed by one, Or it had passed by me', as his brother Charles put it), which is the sole ground of God's redeeming action in Christ.

What is characteristically Wesleyan is his use of the Christ the Victor motif. In Wesley's thought, Christ's victory over the powers of evil is part of his kingly office and is linked with God's sanctifying work in us. Christ not only delivers us from the guilt of sin, but he breaks its power so that it no longer reigns in us. To believe in Jesus Christ is not only to be forgiven, but to have our head lifted up above all our enemies that are round about us.

It is beyond our scope to follow in detail the whole course of Protestant theology through to the present day. It must suffice to indicate the main lines of development.

In spite of the diversity of approaches in the Reformers themselves, evangelical Christianity narrowed the field and fixed on one theory of atonement to the exclusion of all others, as the sole adequate explanation of the mission of Christ. This theory was the doctrine of penal substitution, according to which Christ saves us by becoming our substitute and standing in for us sinners to take the punishment due to us. Through faith in his vicarious death, we are acquitted

This theory is based on a genuine biblical image or analogy, but it is unbiblical to single it out from all other biblical images, as often happened, and make it the only acceptable theory. Worse still, some propounders of the theory went beyond the limits of the language the Bible and the Reformers and depicted God as wrathful and petulant, either unwilling or unable to forgive until appeased by the sacrifice of Jesus. Such presentations of the theory obscured the fact that it was precisely the love of God that initiated the atonement. Instead it seemed that it was God who needed to be reconciled to the world, not, as Scripture says, the world to God.

Not surprisingly, many Christians found this doctrine repugnant, but instead of rediscovering the rich biblical tradition, they tended to react and to oppose to it the traditional radical alternative, namely the moral influence theory. Generally speaking, liberal Christianity opted for some form of this theory, or for the abandonment of all theories of atonement.

A good example of the liberal Protestant position is the statement of Paul Wernle: 'How miserably all those finely constructed theories of sacrifice and vicarious atonement crumble to pieces before this faith in the love of God our Father, who so gladly pardons! The one parable of the Prodigal Son wipes them all off the slate.'[8]

These two competing views became the focus of enormous rivalry and hostility between one group of Protestant Christians and another.

In 1931, there appeared in English an important book by the Swedish theologian, Gustav Aulen, entitled *Christus Victor*. In this

work, Aulen proposed an alternative to these two competing views, built around the Christ the Victor motif, and which he called the classical theory of the atonement.

Actually Aulen gathered under the umbrella of his classic theory many quite separate ideas which he found in the New Testament and early Christian writers. The common thread that bound these ideas together was that of human bondage to the devil and his evil powers and the release accomplished by Christ. This alternative did not command much popular support, possibly because it seemed too mythological for the age.

Writing as late as 1937, Sydney Cave could seriously suggest that for understanding the work of Christ we had only these three options: Aulen's Classic Theory, the Anselmian-Reformation theory which involves making satisfaction to God in one way or another for human sin, and some form of moral theory following Abelard. In the last few years, the situation has changed entirely.

The contemporary situation

There is today a new and thoroughgoing emphasis on the initiative and grace of God, not simply in atonement, but in the mission of Christ generally. It was because of God's love that God sent the Son. and what he accomplished here was God's mission, not some independent mission directed towards God.

This is specifically true of the atonement. As Paul Tillich has said, 'the atoning processes are created by God and God alone. This implies that God, in the removal of the guilt and punishment which stand between him and man, is not dependent on the Christ but that the Christ, as the bearer of the New Being, mediates the reconciling act of God to man'.[9] Or as Donald Baillie puts it, 'in whatever way the process of salvation through the Cross is conceived, God's merciful attitude towards sinners is never regarded as the result of the process, but as its cause and source'.[10]

There is also a new recognition of the variety of images and analogies used in the Scriptures to describe the process of atonement. As a result of renewed study of the nature of biblical and theological language, there has been a recognition of the fact that what we have to do with in the Bible is not a number of separate, competing theories of atonement, but attempts to communicate within the limits of human language an action which is many-sided and ultimately unique. If we are to understand this process of atonement and reconciliation, we need to pay attention to the distinctive light which each image or metaphor throws on the subject, and even then our understanding will only be partial.

In the third place, there has been a new recognition that the mission of Christ is broader than is strictly encompassed by the work of atonement. For a long time, the cross was isolated from the rest of the life of Christ and exaggerated beyond proportion. The doctrine of the cross, isolated from incarnation and resurrection even, was regarded as the central doctrine of Christianity.

Today it is more widely recognised that Christ did not come just to die. There is a realisation that in any case it is not correct to isolate one moment in the life of Christ and lay all the theological weight upon it. His life is a seamless robe. What is the cross without the resurrection? What are either without his life of obedience, love and service?

With all this in mind, an adequate restatement of the doctrine of the mission of Christ will need to include the following points:

1. His mission was to disclose both what God is and what humanity is. In that God was uniquely in Christ, God discloses here God's sovereignty, freedom, holiness and love.
   By the humiliation of the incarnation, God testifies to the gracious divine decision not to be without God's people in spite of their sin, and not to allow people, because of their sin, to exist without God. In so far as it is possible for us to know God at all, we can say, The one who has seen Jesus has seen the Father.
   At the same time, in his full and perfect humanity, Jesus discloses what it is to be truly human. Through him we see that to be human is not by that very fact to be weak and sinful, but it is to participate in the kind of humanity we see in Jesus. By his ministry of love and humble service, by his sacrifice for others and his call to follow him, we see that true humanity involves a being-in-relationship-with our fellow human beings. By the way in which divinity and humanity are together in his being, as well as by his love for and obedience to God, we see that true humanity is a being-in-relationship-with God.
2. It is time to recognise again the importance of Jesus the teacher. In this we can take up again the theme found in early Christian writers like Origen, in Calvin's concept of the prophetic office of Christ and in the liberal Protestant understanding of Jesus as a teacher of eternal truths.
   This understanding of the mission of Christ suffered a severe set-back from the very sceptical biblical scholarship of Bultmann and his followers, who believed that it is virtually impossible to recover any of the original teaching of Jesus. Recent scholarship is much more optimistic. It is widely agreed that while details may be open to dispute, the distinctive substance of Jesus' teaching can now be recovered with some confidence. That teaching is important to us.[11] Even though we may not

speak too sanguinely of salvation by enlightenment, we can be grateful for the teaching of Jesus and confess with Peter: 'Lord, ... You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:68).

3. Christ is our liberator. It is possible to preserve what is essential in those images and metaphors which cluster together around the theme of Christ the Victor. By his life in the flesh, his perfect obedience to the will of the Father, his death and resurrection, Christ has dealt with the sin that tyrannises people. Precisely in his passion and death, human sin reached to its limits, but it was overcome by the grace and goodness of God. Sin could destroy neither love nor the source of love. Of that the resurrection is the sign.
   In view of that victory, the Apostle can say to us also: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21). By this victory of Christ, we are made free to be the sons and daughters of God which he calls us to be.
4. The cross remains tremendously important. Since God in Christ has borne on the cross the fury of human sin, that sin is cancelled. In the cross of Christ as an event it is expiated, covered, atoned for, wiped out by God's grace. We may use various metaphors and analogies to convey this fact: the analogy of Old Testament sacrifice, the metaphor of the debt paid off or the idea of the punishment vicariously suffered by another. However, it must be understood that it is God who in love has provided the way, paid the cost and borne the suffering. So to those who accept what God has done in Christ, there is no longer condemnation, but forgiveness and reconciliation.
   It is unfortunate that theories of the cross have so conditioned the thinking of many people that the crucifixion itself has come to seem unreal - a piece of stage-acting. This is clearly indicated when people say such things as: Well, you can't blame Judas (or Pilate or whoever), for after all Jesus had to die for our sins, and someone had to betray him. Such a statement indicates that the acts themselves are no longer seen as belonging to the real world like our own, where people act out of their own motives and must bear responsibility for what they do.
   Therefore, we have to go to some lengths today to show that the crucifixion was a perfectly human event, entirely explainable in human terms, for, paradoxically, only when it is seen in that way first can it be thoroughly convincing as God's act also.
   Jesus could have avoided the cross, just as Martin Luther King could have avoided assassination had he given up the civil rights struggle after the assassination of President Kennedy and settled down to a non contentious pastoral ministry. King could

not and would not do it, nor could Jesus have passed over Kedron that Thursday night, kept going through Gethsemane and vanished in the darkness. Given that integrity on Jesus' part, the crucifixion is easily comprehensible.

We can understand the jealousy and malice that motivated the religious authorities. We can understand how the crowd was both manipulated and led on by its own sadistic impulses. We can understand that Pilate was jittery and at least acquiesced in the death of an innocent man. Throw in a Judas with his own peculiar motives and you have all the ingredients of a human tragedy the equal of any that Shakespeare described. Yet that human tragedy was, at the same time, the means by which God's grace was at work for us.

5. The salvation Christ effects is also within us. Where the word of the cross is preached and heard, it is itself powerful to change people's lives. This is the truth in moral influence theories of atonement which must not be lost even if the theories are regarded as inadequate on their own. We may speak of this salvation in various ways also, for example, in terms of conversion, re-orientation, reconciliation, or stimulation of love and faith. It involves a kind of death and rebirth. It involves membership in the people of God, the fellowship of believers, and enlistment as a disciple of Christ. Of this great event in our life baptism is the appropriate sign and seal.
6. The death and resurrection of Christ as the means by which he is glorified and exalted are the basis of his presence through the Holy Spirit. No one can say sincerely Jesus is Lord but by the Spirit. Hers is the power by which we hear and heed Christ's call to discipleship. It is because of her presence that our true humanity is not an autonomous humanity, nor even simply a co-humanity with our fellows, but a being in-the-presence-of God.

Notes

1 See John Knox: *Jesus: Lord and Christ*, Harper and Row, 1958, pp. 174-175.
2 John Knox: *Jesus: Lord and Christ*, p. 175.
3 Quoted by J. N. D. Kelly: *Early Christian Doctrines*, Harper & Row, 1960, p. 187.
4 Some Luther scholars dispute the fact that this substitutionary-satisfaction idea is to be found in Luther, but it is clearly expressed in his 1535 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 276).
5 *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, p. 282.
6 J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, S.C.M. Press, 1960, p. 499.
7 *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 12, p. 33.
8 P. Wernle: *The Beginnings of Christianity*, I, p. 109, quoted by D. Baillie: *God was in Christ*, Faber & Faber, 1948, p. 172.
9 P. Tillich: *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 173-174.
10 D. Baillie: *God was in Christ*, p. 188.
11 It is not within the scope of this book to expound the teaching of Jesus. In the last forty years, many books have been published which have that as their aim. Readers who wish to pursue this subject further may find some of the following books helpful:

M. J. Borg: *Jesus: A New Vision*, Harper San Francisco, 1987.
M. J. Borg: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Harper San Francisco, 1994
G. Bornkamm: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1960.
C. H. Dodd: *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Nesbit Press, 1935
A. E. Harvey: *Strenuous Commands: The Ethic of Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1990.
J. Jeremias: *The Parables of Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1963.
T. W. Manson: *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, 1935.
For a Jewish approach to the historical Jesus, see G. Vermes: *Jesus the Jew*, Macmillan, 1973.

11
The Holy Spirit

There are some Christian doctrines which, during the long history of Christian thought, have been the subject of considerable theological reflection. They would include the doctrines of the person and work of Christ and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, however, has not been the subject of sustained reflection, and has not received the attention that would seem to be due to it by virtue of the importance of the Spirit in the New Testament.

This theological neglect is paralleled in the preaching and popular teaching of the church. In the light of this fact, it is not surprising that much of the thinking and speaking of Christians about the Holy Spirit appears confused. Fortunately many more scholars are now turning their attention to this doctrine, stimulated perhaps by the present popular interest in the Holy Spirit which is evidenced in the resurgence of Pentecostalism and in the movement which has become known as Charismatic Renewal

The Spirit in the Old Testament

There are many references to spirit in the Old Testament though only on two occasions is the term, Holy Spirit, used (Psalm 51:11; Isaiah 63:10). Sometimes the spirit is that of a person, but there are also many references to the Spirit of God or the Spirit of the Lord. In some instances, the Spirit of God is basically the energy and actively of God. In the act of creation, the Spirit is mentioned and appears to be that which gives life to the creation called into being by God's Word (Genesis 1:2) It is also by the Spirit that God acts in political and historical events (Zechariah 4:6).

The Spirit is also thought of as a mysterious power from God which may take possession of a person, bestowing special gifts upon him or her. It is the Spirit who gives strength and the gift of leadership to Israel's heroes. Thus it is said that the Spirit of the Lord took hold of Gideon, enabling him to gather the Israelites to defeat the Midianites (Judges 6:34). The Spirit also bestowed artistic gifts upon workers so that they might do fine work. Bezalel, who was responsible for making the tent of meeting and the Ark of the Covenant, had been filled with the Spirit of God to enable him to carry out the work with intelligence and skill.

It was also the Spirit who gave wisdom and authority to kings (1 Samuel 16:13-14) Above all, it is in the gift of prophecy that the Spirit is manifested in people. The Spirit came upon the seventy elders chosen to assist Moses and they all prophesied, even the two who were not present at the time (Numbers 11:24-26) The Spirit came upon Balaam, the Moabite prophet, so that he blessed the people of Israel instead of cursing them, as Balak had called upon him to do (Numbers 24:2)

When Elisha succeeded Elijah, the Spirit who inspired Elijah was transferred to his successor (2 Kings 2:15). It was the Spirit who enabled the prophets to hear the voice of God (Ezekiel 2:2; 11:5), and it was the Spirit who gave the prophet of Isaiah 61 the task he was to perform and the power to carry it through.

According to Psalm 51:11, the Spirit is important for the moral and religious life of the devout person, yet on the whole it was thought in the Old Testament period that the Spirit only came upon a select few, who had specific tasks to perform. Consequently, the Old Testament looks forward to the time when the Spirit will be given to all God's people. When Joshua wanted Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying, Moses answered, 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!' (Numbers 11:29). Joel turned that wish into a prophecy for the future: 'Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit' (Joel 2:28-29).

In a deliberately provocative manner, Professor Hanson has written: 'There is no doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament'.[1] He was not intending to suggest that the Holy Spirit was inoperative in that period, and still less that there was no Holy Spirit. His point is that the people who wrote the Old Testament were not trinitarians and did not see the Holy Spirit in the context in which Christians do. They used the term spirit rather loosely to cover many different experiences and insights. Therefore we must

be careful and discriminating when we make use of the Hebrew Scriptures in formulating a Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Some of these references to spirit could easily have been replaced by other phrases, such as the arm of the Lord or the Word of the Lord and are of doubtful relevance. In other cases, we shall want to affirm what those writers said, believing that they wrote even better than they knew, for what they spoke of as the Spirit of the Lord we can now identify, in the light of Pentecost and all that followed, as the Holy Spirit in action.

The Holy Spirit in the New Testament

Since we shall have to come back and work at greater depth with the New Testament evidence we shall make only a very cursory survey at this point. Mentions of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Spirit are exceedingly numerous in the New Testament as a whole, but in the first three gospels they are relatively rare: only six times in Mark, twelve times in Matthew and eighteen times in Luke.

Some of these references fit more into the framework of the Old Testament and are of doubtful relevance for our task. For example, Matthew has a reference to the Holy Spirit in 12:28 but another phrase could have been used just as well, and in fact in the parallel story in Luke the phrase Jesus uses is not by the Holy Spirit, but by the finger of God (Luke 11:20).

The general view of the New Testament is that the age of the Spirit really begins from the completion of Christ's saving work in the death and resurrection, and it is for this reason that references to the Spirit are so rare in the first three gospels.

There are more references to the Spirit in John's Gospel, about twenty in all, but most of these relate to promises that the Spirit will be given after Christ's glorification.

In the Gospel of Luke, fourteen of the eighteen references occur in the first four chapters and relate particularly to the annunciation and the birth of Jesus and the commencement of his ministry. The reason for this concentration of references is that Luke also regarded the Holy Spirit as the sign of new things. She is peculiarly active in the events surrounding the beginning of the story of Jesus as a sign that the new age is dawning when Jesus is on the way.

By contrast, in Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit is mentioned sixty-two times. It is here that Luke tells the story of Pentecost which he, as well as Peter, saw as the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, and the official inauguration of the new age.

It is not possible to establish precisely how many references to the Holy Spirit occur in the letters of St Paul because there is some

debate about which letters are genuinely his, but clearly his references to the Spirit are very numerous. It was his task, commencing from the new and widespread experience of the Spirit, to work out a doctrine of the Spirit.

Apart from all other factors, events such as those which occurred in the church at Corinth forced this upon him. What was the relationship between the Spirit and Jesus Christ? What are genuine works of the Spirit and what are works of false spirits? How can you tell the difference? These were the kinds of questions he had to attempt to answer.

Even so, it is not perfectly clear from Paul's references that the Spirit is to be thought of in a trinitarian context. This is not surprising. We have already suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be quite simply read from the Scriptures. (See Chapter 4.) It took a lot more thought, and consideration of the alternatives, before the church could say, with the guidance of the Spirit, our experience of God, Source, Word and Spirit required of us this understanding of God's nature.

Later history of the doctrine

As C. F. D. Moule points out, the formulation of the Christian church's understanding of the Holy Spirit in the two centuries following the New Testament period, was largely derived from and dependent on the formulation, at the same period, of the church's understanding of Jesus Christ.[2]

It was only after the Council of Nicea accepted that the Son was of the same essence as the Father, that the question arose whether the same was true of the Holy Spirit. There were those who argued, as Arius had argued about the Son, that the Spirit was of a subordinate nature and status, but it was those who argued that the Spirit was of the same essence as the Father and the Son who eventually prevailed. This conclusion was ratified at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In fact, Nicea had made the same point, though not in the precise terminology, when it referred to the Spirit 'who with the Father and the Son together, is worshipped and glorified'.

The 'filioque' controversy

Until very recent times, when the rise of Pentecostalism and Charismatic Renewal has raised contentious issues, there have been few doctrinal controversies in the church regarding the Spirit. There was, however, one dispute of major proportions which is still a cause of division in the church between East and West. This concerns the Latin word *filioque* (English = and from the Son), which has been added to Western forms of the Nicene Creed at the end

of the paragraph: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father'.

The issue which this word raises is whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, as Eastern Orthodoxy maintains or whether she proceeds from the Father and the Son, as Western Christianity confesses.

The first known use of this word in the Nicene Creed was the third Council of Toledo in 589. From around 800, when the creed began to be chanted at the Mass throughout the Frankish part of the empire with this word included, the addition became widely known and used. The matter came to a head in 847 when some monks from the West began using the expanded version of the paragraph on the Spirit in their monastery in Jerusalem, because it gave offence to local Christians.

The matter was referred to Pope Leo III, who approved the doctrine but called for the addition to be dropped from the Creed. In spite of that, the *filioque* continued to be used in the West and by the 11th century was universally accepted in the West, even at Rome.

Though there have been many non-theological factors in the split between Rome and the East, this has continued to be the main theological point of contention. Attempts to heal the rift were made at the Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence (1439), but they achieved no lasting success.

A new series of discussions between theologians of Eastern and Western Christianity is under way at present and it is to be hoped that, if all differences cannot be resolved, at least an agreement to differ amicably can be reached.[3]

The issue may seem to be a matter of hair-splitting, but very serious concerns are involved. Eastern Orthodoxy quite rightly objects to the surreptitious way in which *filioque* was added to the Creed. Historically speaking, it does not belong in the Creed. There never has been any formal, let alone ecumenical, agreement to add it. The Orthodox charge the Western church with failing to keep faith on an ecumenical agreement. It is angered by the continued use of the addition in the West despite the protests of the East.

Convinced of the weight of the Orthodox argument, some Western churches have now agreed to delete the phrase from the Creed. The Uniting Church in Australia, for example, agreed to delete it at its National Assembly in 1985. Where churches have deleted it, that does not necessarily mean that they have surrendered the point made by the phrase or that their theology of the Holy Spirit has changed.

Even if all churches agreed to delete the phrase from the Creed, there would still be a deep-rooted theological disagreement to be resolved. To the Orthodox, the *filioque* clause is dangerous because

it suggests a double source of origination in the Godhead. To the Western church, the Orthodox view seems to leave open the possibility that all manner of things may be falsely attributed to the Spirit.

To the West, it seems essential that every claim for the working of the Spirit should be tested by its conformity to what we know of God through the incarnate Christ, as he is revealed in Scripture; but without the point which is made by the *filioque* clause, such testing would lack a theological basis. The controversy raises the whole question of the relationship between the Spirit and Christ.

Christ and the Spirit

When we study the New Testament texts, we find three ways in which the relationship between Christ and the Spirit is spoken of.

Jesus, bearer of the Spirit

The first way represents Jesus as the bearer of the Spirit, the one on whom the Spirit comes. Thus Matthew writes of Mary, that 'the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1:20). The Spirit descends upon Jesus at baptism (Matthew 3:16). Then he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1). Later, Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit into Galilee (Luke 4:14) and when he preaches in the synagogue, he chooses the text which says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me' (Luke 4:18). In Acts 10:38, Peter spoke of how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

In the light of such texts, it is not surprising that some of the earliest attempts in Christology explained Jesus as the incarnation of the Spirit. One striking example of this is found in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written in the second century, which says: 'God made the Holy Spirit, which existed before and which created the whole creation, dwell in flesh which he elected. Now this flesh, in which the Holy Spirit dwelt, served the Spirit well in a behaviour of purity and virtue, without casting any stain on the Spirit'.[4]

Christ, the sender of the Spirit

Secondly, there is another prominent strand in the New Testament which represents Christ as the sender of the Spirit. This is found primarily in the Gospel of John, where we find the following words of Jesus: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever' (John 14:16), 'the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name' (John 14:26), 'when the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father' (John 15:26), 'if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come, but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16:7).

The same kind of relationship between Christ and the Spirit can be found at various places in the letters of Paul. In Romans 8:9, he refers to the Spirit as 'the Spirit of Christ'. In Galatians, he refers to 'the Spirit of [God's] Son' (Galatians 4:6), and in Philippians, he refers to 'the Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:19).

On the basis of these texts, the church in both East and West has agreed that, as far as the Spirit's coming in the world is concerned, she is sent by (thus proceeds from) the Father and the Son. The Western Church has argued that this relationship of the Spirit to the Father and the Son externally must reflect a corresponding relationship within the Trinity, otherwise God would be different in Godself from what is disclosed to us in revelation. That is to say, God would be a deceiver rather than a revealer. With this argument the East has never agreed, and hence the protracted doctrinal dispute referred to earlier.

The Spirit as the presence of the exalted Christ

Thirdly, there is a strand of thought in the New Testament in which the Spirit is identified with the risen Christ. So in John 14:18 we read that Jesus said: 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you'. This is in the context of his promise to the disciples to send them another Advocate. The implication is that it is he himself who will be present with them. So also, in the context of the great missionary commission of Matthew 28:20, we have the promise of the risen Jesus, 'I am with you always', a presence we have to understand in terms of the presence of the Spirit.

In numerous places in the writings of St Paul, Christ and the Spirit are interchangeable. A good example of this is to be found in Romans 8:9-11, where the divine indwelling presence is referred to as the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ and Christ. Mention can also be made of 2 Corinthians 3:17 where Paul writes, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit'.[5]

According to this strand, the Holy Spirit can be said to be none other than the earthly presence of the exalted Christ.

Some people have expressed the view that the first and third strands just mentioned run counter to the doctrine of the Trinity. However, this is not the case. When the doctrine of the Trinity was under discussion, it was pointed out that however one meets God, whether it is as Father, incarnate Son, or Holy Spirit, it is God in all God's fullness, not just a fragment of God whom we meet. Therefore, the incarnate Son is not without the Spirit and the One who meets us as Spirit is not apart from the Son.

This particularly needs to be emphasised with respect to the Spirit, since much confusion exists on this matter. If we speak of the Spirit in the context of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, we

are not speaking either about a one third part of God, or about a third God. The One who meets us as Holy Spirit is no less than, and no other than, the one God, who subsists in a threefold way.

The work of the Spirit

Discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit has in the past been shaped by an understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Spirit exclusively along the lines of the second strand described above, that is, the relationship of Christ as sender, the Spirit as sent. When we speak of the work of the Spirit in this way, the Spirit is inevitably made subject to the historical and incarnate Christ. The work of the Spirit then is in no sense a new work, but rather the completion of the work of Christ in particular individuals. She simply brings to fruition in concrete instances the general, once-for-all work of Christ.

There are numerous Scripture passages which speak of the work of the Spirit in this way, especially in the Gospel of John. According to John, Jesus said: 'he will not speak on his own ... He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:13-14).

This is also the way in which the work of the Spirit is treated in Reformed theology. The title of Book 3, Chapter 1 of Calvin's *Institutes* is 'The Things Spoken Concerning Christ Profit Us By the Secret Working of the Spirit'. Barth speaks of the Spirit as the Subjective Reality of Revelation and says, 'But fundamentally and generally there is no more to say of Him than that He is the power of Jesus Christ in which it takes place that there are [people] who can and must find and see that He is theirs and they are His'.[6] When the Spirit's work is understood in this way, it tends to be confined to the individual and related almost exclusively to revelation and redemption.

The role of the Spirit in revelation has been discussed in Chapter 3, so we are concerned here with the work of redemption, that is to say, the role of the Spirit in our justification and sanctification. It has been customary to ascribe justification to Christ and only sanctification to the Spirit. Thus Wesley was accustomed to distinguish the two as follows: 'Justification implies what God does for us through His Son, sanctification, what He works in us by His Spirit'.[7]

As a matter of fact, even for Wesley, both are objectively grounded in the work of Christ. The one death of Christ is seen as a propitiation for our sin, and a victory over Satan. To believe in Christ is to be delivered at one and the same time from the guilt of sin and from its power. And both justification and sanctification are subjectively grounded in the work of the Spirit. Even justification does not occur automatically as a result of Christ's

death; faith is absolutely essential, and justifying faith is the gift of God, received by the working of the Spirit in our hearts. Nor is Christ's victory over Satan translated into our victory over sin, and hence our sanctification, until the Spirit grants us that victory in our own lives.

Nevertheless, in Christian thought and piety, it is particularly the work of sanctification which has been linked with the Spirit. There are good scriptural grounds for this. Especially in the letters of Paul there is a strong ethical component in the work of the Spirit. Believers are people who walk by the Spirit (Romans 8:4), are led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14) and order their lives by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25).

The answer to the lawless conduct described in Galatians 5:19-21 is not a stricter application of the law, but openness to the Spirit, who causes the good fruit, love, joy, peace, patience, etc. to grow in people's lives. This is the source of the central paradox (as Baillie calls it) of the Christian life: All our virtues and victories are not ours but the Spirit's, yet we are never more truly ourselves than when we are most fully at the Spirit's disposal.

One can hardly imagine a more important work than this, but strangely enough it has never raised much excitement. For most of Christian history, the Spirit has not been in the headlines.

Now, in the light of that strand of the New Testament which identifies the Spirit and the exalted Christ, we are enabled to speak of another, freer work of the Holy Spirit. Here the Spirit is not subjected in quite the same way to the incarnate Christ. The way is opened for us to ascribe to the Spirit a new work, one that is indeed the work of Christ, but which is something more than the making real of the once-for-all work of the incarnate Christ.

Wesley regarded the gift of assurance as part of the free work of the Spirit (Romans 8:16). A second part of this free work of the Spirit is what might be called the Spirit's charismatic work. That is to say, the Spirit bestows the *charismata*, or gifts, which are mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Romans 12. It is in relation to this work that we may interpret Luke's references in Acts to being filled with the Spirit.

Here two cautions need to be noted. First, although one can speak of this as a free work of the Spirit, as compared with the Spirit's work in revelation and redemption, the bond between the person and work of the Spirit and the incarnate Christ must never be totally severed, for the risen Lord, who is present in the Spirit, is none other than the risen incarnate Christ. Therefore, there cannot be any conflict between the free work of the Spirit and the work and teaching of Jesus. Where there is a conflict we must assume

that what is claimed to be the work of the Spirit is not the work of the Holy Spirit but of some other spirit.

Secondly, it must be noted that when Luke speaks of being filled with the Spirit, the emphasis falls not on the inner emotions and the enjoyment associated with this event, but on its external consequences namely, that people begin to prophesy, to praise God, to be Christ's witnesses, and to speak the word of God with boldness.

The meaning and purpose of the filling by the Holy Spirit have been described excellently by H. Berkhof as follows:

> *It is clear that being filled by the Spirit means to equip the individual in such a way that he becomes an instrument for the ongoing process of the Spirit in the church and in the world. It is more than what is expressed in sanctification which makes us, in love and in good works, a testimony of Christ to our neighbour. This is a common command, related to our common human nature, which can be carried out in a person-to-person relation. Therefore, in addition to the fruits of the Spirit - faith, hope, love - there are also the gifts of the Spirit, which vary from one member to another and which are the instruments by which we partake in the wider ecclesiastical and cosmic dimensions of the Spirit's work ... The Spirit in justification occupies the centre of ourselves; in sanctification, the whole circle of our human nature; and in filling us, he occupies our individuality, the special mark which I and I alone bear, the special contribution which I have to make to the whole of life. He takes it up for the whole of the Kingdom of God.*[8]

It is particularly in relation to this second work of the Holy Spirit that it becomes clear to us that the Spirit's work is not simply an individualistic work. For the gifts which the Spirit gives are not for our personal enjoyment. They are clearly given to us for the building up of the body of Christ, for the edification of our fellow members and for the mission of the church in the world.

In 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, Paul clearly implies that the gifts can be sought and he makes it clear that the ones to be sought are the higher gifts. At the beginning of Chapter 14 he makes it clear that gifts are higher in so far as they have power to build up a Christian community. That is why prophecy is set so high and love is so important. Compared with such things, ecstatic utterance is regarded as lower, because while it edifies the individual it is not so effective in building up the community.

The Spirit and the church

In Protestant Christianity, the understanding of the work of the Spirit has mostly been too individualistic, and insufficient

attention has been given to the relation of the Spirit directly to the community of believers, the church.

While Catholic theology has tended to institutionalise the Spirit by relating the Spirit's work primarily to the church, and only indirectly to the individual, Protestants, especially those with Pentecostal leanings, have tended to regard the Spirit as having only an indirect concern with the church. The extreme situation even occurs where believers regard it as part of their calling to secede from the churches and live outside any visible, institutional community.

In less extreme situations, the church is regarded as simply a means or a tool, a pragmatic gathering together for mutual support, a religious club for those who recognise one another as bearers of the Spirit. The church then becomes a purely human institution, little different from any secular club, and may be dissolved quite easily, or abandoned when participants no longer recognise one another as bearers of the Spirit.

It must be emphasised, therefore, that in the New Testament the well-ordered fellowship of the church is as much, and as primarily, the work of the Spirit as the redemption and filling of the individual.

In the first place, it is the Spirit who creates the community by creating the fellowship (*koinonia* in Greek) on which it is based. The creation of the *koinonia* was as much a direct work of Pentecost as the conversion of individuals. The two cannot be separated. The community is not just the result of the decisions of like-minded people to form a group together. It is created by God through the Holy Spirit.

According to 1 Corinthians 12 to 14,-this is what the charismatic work of the Spirit is all about. In this regard, the Corinthian benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14) is of great significance. It is difficult to fix precisely the meaning of the phrase 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit', but in the first place it is notable that it is precisely fellowship which is linked with the Spirit.

If the three phrases of the benediction are intended to have a symmetry about them, then as the grace of Christ is the grace he gives, and the love of God the love God bestows, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the fellowship with God and one another which the Spirit creates. It would, however, be equally possible to translate the phrase as the participation in (or sharing in) the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the meaning is not greatly altered whichever way we take it. In the latter case, the implication is that it is our common participation in, or sharing in, the Holy Spirit which makes of us one fellowship. (See also Philippians 2:1.)

This fellowship of the Holy Spirit is not simply any kind of fellowship with any order and structure we choose to give to it. The Spirit also gives to the fellowship a certain order. This must be said in opposition to those people who will accept the Spirit's role in creating fellowship, but insist that the fellowship so created must be structureless and unordered. The Spirit is concerned with the church as institution as well as the church as fellowship.

So Paul, after dealing with the gifts, in his letter to the Corinthians, sets out principles for their use: It is for prophets to control prophetic inspiration, for the God who inspires them is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:32-33). And he concludes: 'So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:39-40).

According to Berkhof, there are at least seven ways in which the New Testament sees the Spirit as concerned with outward acts and order. They are through baptism, the laying-on of hands, the Holy Communion, the preaching of the word, the exercise of authority and discipline in the church, the ministry of the apostles and the ministry in general.[9] It is on this basis that we may assert that the work of the Spirit in the church has to do with form as well as content, with institution as well as fellowship.

There is also, of course, a danger here, namely that forms and structures come to be regarded as the important thing, the goal, instead of merely the means through which the Spirit works. However, we do not get rid of danger by eliminating the means in favour of a structureless immediacy of the Spirit's presence. That was what led to the disorder which Paul attacked in the Corinthian congregation. Rather we have to see orders and structures for what they are: means, to that extent important, but only for the ends to which the Spirit works.

The fellowship and order of the church are important but they are not an end in themselves. The end for which they exist is mission. It is only in terms of mission that we can do full justice to that understanding of the Spirit which sees in her the presence of the risen Lord. In Matthew 28:19-20, the assurance of the continual presence of the Lord, a presence in the Spirit, is thoroughly bound up with the commission to the disciples to go forth and make disciples of all nations. Even though it follows the commission, the assurance is the ground of it.

In John 20:21-22, we have another version of the commissioning of the disciples for mission, and here the connection with the Spirit is even clearer. Jesus says: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. Then he breathed on them saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

The same connection between the Spirit and mission is found in Acts 1:8. In fact, we can go as far as to say that the main role of the Spirit, as Luke presents it in Acts, is to advance the mission of God through the church. (See, for example, Acts 4:8; 8:29; 13:2-4; 16:6-10; 20:28)

In John 16:8, speaking of the coming Advocate, Jesus says, 'When he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment'. Here it is the Spirit who is actually the agent of mission, so that even though it is the disciples who speak, it is the Spirit and not they who convinces the world. It is thoroughly in agreement with this when Jesus also says, 'When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you' (Matthew 10:19-20).

The Spirit in the world

In spite of what has just been said in the preceding section, we may not so limit the work of the Spirit to the church that we deny the Spirit's power and freedom to work beyond the church. It is true that there is not a lot in the Old Testament about the cosmic work of the Spirit, and even less in the New. It is largely through the mission which the Spirit inspires and supports that she is related to the world beyond the believing community. Nevertheless, we may not confine the Spirit to the church, just because the risen Lord wills to be, and is, not only head of the church, but the head of the whole world. In the Spirit, Christ is present in the whole world as a revolutionary, liberating, humanising presence.

It is on the basis of this activity of the Spirit that we may speak in Wesleyan fashion of prevenient grace. Even before Christians arrive with the gospel, the Spirit is preparing people to hear and respond, granting a measure of freedom, restoring a degree of natural conscience, so that even those who do not know the gospel have both the opportunity and the obligation to know and preserve what is human and good.

The Holy Spirit and the end-time

In the prophecy of Joel, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is connected with the end-time, the day of the Lord, and consistently in the New Testament also the work of the Spirit has an eschatological significance; that is to say, the Spirit's presence and activity are a sign of the last time and point to the final consummation. This is demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles, where the event of Pentecost is interpreted in terms of Joel's prophecy.

It has already been mentioned that this is the explanation for the concentration of references to the Spirit around the birth of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. With the coming of Jesus, the new and last age is dawning. Above all it is in the letters of Paul that the Spirit is linked with the end-time. Paul speaks of the Spirit both as the first fruits (or the first sheaf) of the consummation harvest (Romans 8:23), and as the first instalment, the down-payment, or guarantee of the full inheritance which is to come at the end-time (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). Through the work of the Spirit, the future is even now breaking into the present. The new creation, which is to come, is already coming. We may participate in it now in so far as we walk by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:16-18).

Paul is aware, however, that there is a tension in the Christian life, the tension between the already and the not yet, between realisation and expectation. We have died with Christ, died to sin, and yet sin still remains in us; we have been redeemed from death and yet these mortal bodies have not yet put on immortality. Our life in Christ is therefore not one in which we already possess all things, but it is a life of hope and promise in which the gift and work of the Spirit are the ground of our confidence.

Notes

1 R. P. C. Hanson: 'The Divinity of the Holy Spirit', in Marty & Peerman, Eds.: *New Theology*, No. 7. 1970, p. 193.
2 C. F. D. Moule: *The Holy Spirit*, Mowbrays, 1978, p. 43.
3 For some of the contributions to this discussion, see L. Vischer, Ed.: *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ - Ecumenical Reflections on the 'Filioque' Controversy*, W.C.C./S.P.C.K., 1981.
4 Quoted by H. Berkhof: *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Epworth Press, 1964, p. 20.
5 It must be conceded that there is some debate about whom it is Paul is referring to here as 'the Lord'.
6 K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics* IV/1,T. & T. Clark, 1956, p. 648.
7 J. Wesley: *Standard Sermons I*, Annotated by E. H. Sugden, Epworth Press, 1956, p. 119.
8 H. Berkhof: *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 89-90.
9 H. Berkhof: *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 51-52.

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The church, the sacraments and ministry

The church

Many people, including some closely involved in it, regard the church as something of secondary importance. As they see it, the one really important thing is the individual Christian, living his or her Christian life following Jesus and trying to serve him in the world.

Of course, Christians like to get together, or at least some do, and there are certain activities such as worship, Sunday schools, youth groups, for which numbers and organisational structure are necessary. This is what the church can provide.

However, these things are to some extent optional, and while the church helps to make them possible, it can also be a nuisance. Thus the church is seen not only as secondary, but as something apart from, and even over against the individual Christian. The church is always 'them', not us.

The teaching of the New Testament is very different. The church is by no means secondary in the New Testament. The books of the New Testament are full of references to the church, though it is not always called by that name, just as Christians are not always referred to by that name.

One New Testament scholar, Paul Minear,[1] has found just under one hundred different images or metaphors by which the church is referred to in the New Testament. Some scholars would even say that it is the church, the whole community of believers, which is primary for the New Testament, and the individual Christian and his or her life which is secondary. Thus Berkhof points out that we most often deal with the Spirit's work in the order: Individual - church - Mission, but the more correct order

theologically would be: Mission - church - Individual, for the Mission leads to the church and the church is the ground and mother of the individual life.[2]

We recall how Jesus referred to himself and his disciples as being like a vine with its many branches. To be apart from the vine is to wither and die. Life is only possible as part of the vine (John 15:1-8). The church is no more secondary to the individual than the vine is to the branches. If we look at the account of the day of Pentecost, we are not told that three thousand people were converted, but that three thousand were added to their number (Acts 2:41). They immediately became a community, worshipping together, sharing their possessions, learning from the apostles, and praising God.

The church as ekklesia

The Greek word which is translated in the New Testament as church is *ekklesia*. It is not found in Mark, Luke, John or the epistles of Peter. It is found in Matthew, Acts, the epistles of Paul and in Revelation. In normal Greek, *ekklesia* means any gathering of people, particularly if called together for a particular purpose. It is derived from a verb which means to call out. This suggests that in biblical usage the *ekklesia* is formed as God in Christ calls people out of the world into a new community.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, *ekklesia* is frequently used to translate the Hebrew word meaning assembly. This suggests that in the New Testament the *ekklesia* is the assembly of the New Israel. In Acts, the word is used both in the singular and the plural. There are many churches, not just one church with many congregations. Paul's usage was similar to that of Acts. He could refer to the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14), but he could also address his letter to the Corinthians to the church of God which is at Corinth (2 Corinthians 1: 1).

One may draw the conclusion from this that the church is not a great community made up of many small communities, but that it is really present in its wholeness in every company of believers.

New Testament images for the church

The New Testament images or metaphors for the church are important if we are to understand what the church is. As mentioned earlier, there are many of these, most of them of minor importance, such as the salt of the earth, a letter from Christ (2 Corinthians 3:2-3), the olive tree (Romans 11:13-24), God's planting (1 Corinthians 3:9), God's building, the Elect Lady (2 John) and the Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:1 and Ephesians 5:22-31). Of the major images, or clusters of images, we shall look at three: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The people of God

The people of God or the Israel of God is a major New Testament image for the church. This use of people is found in Acts 15:14, 18:10, Romans 9:25f.; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 4:9; 8:10, 10:30, 13:12; 1 Peter 2:9f.; Revelation 18:4; 21:3.

In the Old Testament, it was the nation of Israel which was God's people. The use of this term, therefore, emphasises the continuity of the church with Israel. This is particularly clear from Romans 9:25f, where Paul makes use of the passage from Hosea which says, Those who were not my people I will call 'my people'. In 1 Peter 2:9f, not only is the church called the people of God, but other terms, once applied exclusively to Israel, are applied to the church: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (Compare Exodus 19:6).

There are two important implications in this image. First, the existence and character of this community depends upon God's call and promise. It does not come into being just because people are gregarious or because, having a similar religious outlook, they decide it would be good to get together. Nor does its character arise from the fact that these people choose to do certain things together. It comes into being because God calls it into being and it is God's purposes for it which must determine its character.

Secondly, to be a member of this community can never be understood merely in terms of privilege. Certainly it is a marvellous privilege to belong to this people, but one is called to belong not for one's own sake but for the sake of God's redemptive mission in the world. As the letter of Peter says to its readers, the church is God's own people that it may declare the wonderful deeds of the One who called its members out of darkness into God's marvellous light.

The body of Christ

Probably the most familiar metaphor for the church is the body of Christ. Undoubtedly it is a major New Testament image, but it is not as pervasive in the New Testament as some others. It is limited to Paul's letters and even then is found only in a few places.

Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that this is not a metaphor at all, but a literal description, and hence they speak about the church as an extension of the incarnation. This is a most dubious interpretation. There is nothing about the texts to indicate that this alone of all the biblical images is to be treated as something more than an analogy and a metaphor.

When we speak today of the church as the body of Christ, we often mean that the church is his instrumentality; it is the means by which he is active in serving the world and continuing his ministry. There is some truth in this, but the Bible itself does not use the metaphor of the body in this way.

Paul's most celebrated use of the body image is in Romans 12:6-8, and in 1 Corinthians 12-14. These last three chapters are really a single literary unit and should be read as such. Only a few verses actually use the body image but the whole passage has to be interpreted with this image in mind. Paul's basic intention in using this figure of speech was to emphasise the unity and interdependence of all Christians. He was more concerned about the horizontal relationship between Christians than the vertical relationship between the community and its Lord.

In Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 1:22 and 5:23ff., the church is referred to as the body of which Christ is the head. There is a problem of interpretation here. Was the author thinking of the head as part of the body or as something independent of it? In the latter case, the head would mean the ruler or the boss, just as we speak of the head of a school or a business organisation, and the implication would be that Christ is the ruler of the church and the church must submit to his guidance and direction. If the author intended the head to be thought of as part of the body, along with trunk and limbs, there is the added implication that the church is dependent upon him for its life and strength, its harmonious ordering, as well as its unity and purpose.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

The third image of importance associated with the church is fellowship. The New Testament word rendered as fellowship is *koinonia*. It is derived from the word *koinos*, which means common. This is the word used in Acts 2:44, where it is said that those who believed had all things in common. *Koinonia* literally means having something in common, being partners, or mates, in a venture, sharing together in a common project. It is this sharing together which is the foundation of fellowship.

There are some things we all share in common, such as our humanity, and that alone may be the basis of fellowship, but normally we look for people with whom we share more particular things, such as work, hobbies, a particular outlook on life. Such things become the basis for fellowships such as business clubs, sporting clubs, and societies of various kinds. Christian fellowship is also based on the sharing of things; the difference is in what it is that Christians share. They are a fellowship because, whatever differences there may be, they are sharers in the love of God, sharers in Christ and in the gift of the Spirit.

The church is rarely called directly and quite simply a fellowship, but the word is continually associated with the community of believers beginning from the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:42). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says: God is faithful,

by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9). The Corinthian correspondence ends with the benediction, ' and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Corinthians 13:14).

It was just such a sharing in the Spirit in a genuine way which could make out of all the factions in Corinth a true fellowship, and hence a church as God intended it to be. This idea of *koinonia* based on a fellowship with God is a prominent concept in the Gospel of John and the first epistle (See especially I John 1:3 and 7).

Even where the word fellowship does not occur in English, the idea is often present and is clearly expressed in the Greek. Thus the Holy Communion is referred to as a participation (or a communion) in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). Often the idea is expressed through the peculiarly New Testament usage of compound verbs with the prefix *syn* - (with, or together). This usage is so extensive it would not be possible to give an adequate survey of it here.

In the first instance, the use of the *syn* prefix links the life and action of the believer with Christ (suffering with, dying with, being buried with, being raised with, to be glorified with), but then this link with Christ creates a solidarity and mutuality amongst Christians themselves. They become joint-heirs of the kingdom, fellow slaves, witnesses together, builders together, and sharers together in the inheritance of glory.[3]

Warts and all

The New Testament images of the church represent what it is in hope, so we need to take note also of what the church in the New Testament is like in reality. In places the ideal appears to be realised, as in the community of believers in the early chapters of the book of Acts, but we also get pictures of the church which represent it as very far from the ideal.

In this regard, a good example would be the church at Corinth, divided into factions, quarrelling, permitting immorality, and so on. Yet all through the correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul continued to address them as the congregation of God 's people at Corinth. In spite of all that is wrong in the Corinthian congregation, it is still the church.

Consider also the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. In writing to the seven churches, John is writing to the whole church, as the number seven suggests. Nevertheless we have here also portraits of seven individual Christian communities. Of the seven, two receive commendation without reproof, two receive only reproof and warning, and the other three mixed commendation

and reproof. They are, therefore, a very mixed bag and together present a realistic picture of the church - warts and all.

To these two examples, one may add other smaller details, such as Paul's exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche at Philippi to agree together in the Lord's fellowship (Philippians 4:2-3). Thus in the New Testament itself, the contrast between the ideal and the reality is quite evident.

Developments beyond the New Testament

The New Testament gives no clear indication about the organisation and structure of the church. Probably there was not any universal structure. The apostles themselves formed the link between the scattered Christian communities and ensured that they did not develop inappropriate structures. Two things caused the situation to change: the imprisonment and death of the apostles and the threat of heresy and schism.

The threat of heresy and schism was met in a number of ways. Credal statements embodying the true faith and distinguishing it from heretical views were developed and used. The canon of Scriptures recognised as authoritative in the church was defined. Perhaps the most significant development from our point of view was the emergence of special ministries and offices in the church, for it was this development more than any other which gave structure and organisation to the congregations.

Tried and tested overseers were appointed to each congregation. At first, they seem to have been known either as elders or bishops (literally, overseers) and there may have been several in each congregation, but this soon led to mon-episcopacy (that is, one bishop in charge of a congregation) and the exaltation of the episcopal office. Only those who were in fellowship with the bishop were members of the true church; all others were heretics and schismatics.

One person greatly influential in this development was Ignatius of Antioch, bishop in that city at the beginning of the second century, who argued strongly for mon-episcopacy as a safeguard to Christian unity. According to Ignatius, the bishop was as the Lord and without his authority no eucharist could be celebrated in the congregation.

Cyprian (200-260), Bishop of Carthage, also had an important influence. He emphasised the oneness of the visible church and he too upheld the episcopate as the foundation of that unity. Those not in fellowship with the bishop were outside the church, and, according to Cyprian, outside the church there is no salvation. He is famous for the statement, 'he cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother'.

Origen of Alexandria was a contemporary of Cyprian, but, being influenced by Platonism, he led the doctrine of the church in a different direction, by making the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. By the visible church, he meant the community and organisation as we see it here on earth, while the invisible church is the ideal to which the church on earth must approximate as far as possible, and to which eventually only the sanctified will belong.

In St Augustine (354-430), the famous Bishop of Hippo, both these streams of thought were united. On the one hand, he emphasised the unity and catholicity of the true church, and the importance of the bishop as the focus of unity, but on the other hand, like Origen, he made a distinction between the visible church, which includes both true and false Christians and the invisible church, consisting only of the elect both within and outside the visible church.

From very early times, the church in Rome enjoyed a certain pre-eminence, partly by virtue of the fact that Rome was the capital of the Empire, partly because of its centrality, and perhaps also because both Peter and Paul taught, and probably died, there. Rome's pre-eminence was recognised by the fact that bishops from other areas appealed to Rome for the settlement of disputes. Eventually this led to the bishops of Rome claiming supremacy over all other bishops and authority over the whole church, not only in spiritual matters, but also in matters of jurisdiction.

It was Pope Leo I (440-461) who formally stated Rome's claims. He argued that Jesus had conferred on Peter, and Peter alone, supreme authority (Matthew 16:18-19), that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and had passed on this authority to his successors. He argued further that since this supreme authority was passed on in the succession of Roman bishops, their authority extended to the whole church whereas the authority of other bishops was limited to their own sees.

The eastern church never really accepted the claims of Rome. In the late Middle Ages, other voices of opposition were raised also. John Wyclif in England (1329-1384) and John Hus in Bohemia (1369-1415) protested, but it was not until the time of the Reformation that the Pope's claims were seriously challenged.

The teaching of the Reformers

Luther understood the church as a community of saints. He took the phrase *communio sanctorum* (the communion of saints) in the Apostles' Creed as a description of the preceding phrase, 'the holy catholic church'. He understood saints not as the blessed and

perfect ones in heaven, but in the biblical sense of those who truly believe on earth. He understood *communio*, and hence the church, as a community of sharing, not as a hierarchical institution. What was essential in the constitution of this community was not the authority of the Pope and the bishops, but the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

The visible church was very important for Luther. He believed that it was through the church that people find Christ. He could say, 'Whoever seeks Christ must first find the church'. This is because God's Word is found and proclaimed there. He could say, 'God's Word cannot exist without God's people', but he immediately balanced this by saying also, 'God's people cannot exist without God's Word'.[4]

Nevertheless, Luther knew that the church is far from perfect and cannot be perfect, any more than the individual Christian can be perfect, in this world. For this reason people may very well miss the church, or fail to discern it, because it is veiled in the flesh, hidden under a form that is the very opposite of what one might expect of the church. In that sense, it is invisible just as faith is invisible, but for Luther the invisible church is not separated from the visible community, but is to be discerned by faith within it.

Calvin's understanding of the church was influenced by Augustine and Cyprian and hence he saw the church particularly as the body of Christ and the mother of the Christian, without which there is no salvation: 'For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keeps us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels ... Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.'[5] Nevertheless, the church is not, as such language might suggest, something apart from those who are its members.

Calvin distinguished the visible and invisible churches much more sharply and statically than did Luther. By the invisible church, he meant that which is actually in God's presence, and of which only those who are truly children of God by election and the grace of adoption are members. The visible church, on the other hand, consists of 'the whole multitude of [people] spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ', but mixed in this visible church are 'many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance'.[6] We cannot tell who are the true believers and who are hypocrites. That is for God alone to determine. We must not separate ourselves from the church on the ground that we believe we discern hypocrites within it.

On the other hand, it is possible for that which claims to be a church to be no true church at all, and so we are given certain marks by which we may know where Christ's body truly is. 'Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.'[7] Calvin also regarded the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline as important, but he did not, like some other Reformers, regard it as one of the marks of the true church.

Both Luther and Calvin differed from the radical reformers in two ways. First, they were concerned for the unity of the whole church whereas the radicals regarded the unity of each local congregation as the only form of unity that was important. Secondly, they recognised and accepted the fact that the church is inevitably a mixture of true believers and hypocrites, whereas the radicals were intent upon securing a church of true believers only, truly seeking after sanctification.

While it is valuable for us to understand the thinking of the reformers about the church it is important to bear in mind that they spoke in the context of European Christendom and therefore they did not give adequate consideration to the church's mission.

The contemporary discussion of the doctrine of the church

Many factors have arisen in recent years to lead the discussion of the doctrine of the church along entirely different lines. The first of these is the ecumenical movement. The Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 sparked off a new interest in this area of doctrine, usually referred to as ecclesiology. A great deal of research was undertaken both in the New Testament literature and in the theological tradition with the hope that the churches might find behind their disunities the given unity and fellowship of the church of Jesus Christ.

The situation was improved by Vatican II and the relief of Roman Catholic-Protestant tensions which was one of the by-products of the Council. It was no longer so necessary for the two sides to take a strong polemical attitude to each other. Both sides were enabled to move beyond the question of the marks of the true church to more basic issues about the nature of the church.

In Protestantism, another important factor was the movement in various places towards organic unions of denominations. As these denominations of varied traditions considered entering into union with one another, they were forced to look more deeply at the question of the nature of the church, so that an adequate basis and constitution might be arrived at.

A similar effect was produced by the transition of the mission fields to independent churches. In the mission areas particularly, the absurdity of the divisions of the churches of the Western world was very obvious. There was a strong feeling in Asia and Africa that there should be only one mission as there is only one Lord. So there began here also a questioning of both Scripture and tradition in a most radical way, to find out why there were so many churches, and whether and how the many might become one again. This has had an effect well beyond the younger churches themselves.

This same development, together with the demise of Christendom in the West, has also led to a major reconsideration of what the church is for - what its mission is.

As in many other areas of doctrine, so in ecclesiology, the developments in biblical scholarship, and particularly in biblical theology, have produced a great deal of ferment. Indeed the factors already mentioned could not have had such far-reaching effects if they had not had at their service the tools of this scholarship. A very good example of this scholarship is the work of Paul Minear, which has already been referred to earlier in the chapter.

Yet another factor which has influenced the discussion of the nature of the church has been the application of sociology to the life and structure of churches. The church responds very well to sociological analysis. It does not exhibit a peculiar mode of existence otherwise foreign to the sociologist. It appears not 'as a divinely established and ordered commonwealth of [people] whose citizenship is in heaven, but rather as a quite earthly and human community and institution'.[8]

The paradox of the church

The sociological analysis of the church thus confronts us very powerfully with a question which has always been there, but which, to some extent, we have been able to ignore. The question is how a divided, weak, sinful company of people, whose association appears to conform to the patterns of all other human associations, can rightfully or meaningfully be described as the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

As observed above, the challenge to the church is not new and there are already a number of responses to it.

1. One response is to admit that the church is just a voluntary association of individual believers, a religious society, if you like, and therefore it is not to be wondered at that it is just like any other human society. This answer does away with the paradox, but it makes nonsense of the high-sounding phrases used of the church in the New Testament.

2. A second response would claim that whatever sins and errors attach to the members, the church itself is divine and sinless. Its dogmatic pronouncements are infallible, its symbols and structures eternally valid. The church as church shares in the perfection of God. This response makes it very difficult to understand what the church is. It appears to be some ghostly, heavenly thing which is beyond examination and probably beyond relevance.
3. There is a very similar response which draws a radical distinction between the institution and the true church. As an institution, it is said, the church behaves like all other institutions, but it is not this of which the Bible speaks in such exalted terms. The divinely established *ecclesia* is something above and beyond the institution. It is a spiritual reality which is without blemish. This view also is unacceptable. This is not the way Paul, for example, speaks of the church. The Corinthian community in all its divisiveness and immorality is still addressed as the church at Corinth.
4. Yet another response is to draw a distinction, as Augustine and Calvin did, between the visible and the invisible church. The visible church is the externally observable community of both true believers and hypocrites, and therefore is subject to corruption, but the invisible church consists only of the elect and is the true body of Christ and without corruption. This distinction will not be found in the New Testament, which does not speak of an invisible church, but only of the church which is visible and identifiable. In any case, the trouble with the church is not just caused by the actions of a group of hypocrites within it, but by all its members, believers and unbelievers alike.
5. Perhaps the problem is best resolved along Lutheran lines. As Luther understood it, the nature of the church involves a both ... and ... It is both a sinful, worldly institution and the people of God, the body of Christ. It is both what the sociologist says of it and what the New Testament says. Hence it is truly perceived only by the eyes of faith. The outward eye may see only the institution, disunited, imperfect, in most respects behaving like other institutions, yet the eye of faith does perceive within this same church the body of Christ, the community of the Spirit. Thus it was with Christ also. Many people saw in him only an ordinary man, or worse still, a trouble-maker. Only the eyes of faith recognised in the son of Mary the Christ of God.

Helpful as this analogy with Christ is, we must take care not to press it too far, since the humanity of the church is not the sinless humanity of Christ. It may be better, therefore, to draw an analogy

between the church and the individual Christian. No Christian is perfect. Everyone is a sinner, and may be called a Christian only because he or she has claimed God's grace by faith, and is thereby justified and righteous in God's sight. That does not mean that the Christian can be complacent about his or her shortcomings. It does mean that anyone who fastens simply on those shortcomings is not seeing the whole picture.

This is true of the church too. Compelled to involve itself in the institutional life of the world, it will inevitably be subject to the tendency to be conformed to other human institutions. It will be sinful as they are. If it claims the right to be called the church, the people of God, it is only because by faith it too lays hold of the grace of God.

The church also cannot be complacent about its shortcomings and its conformity with other institutions, but must daily hear and respond to the call to repent of its sins and be what Christ called it to be. Nevertheless, to fasten on the church's shortcomings and its likeness to other human institutions alone is to miss the full picture.

The church as event

In this connection, some have spoken of the church as event. This manner of speaking is derived from Karl Barth. It was Barth's way of getting at the twofold nature of the church. Summarising Barth's position, Herbert Hartwell says: 'To Barth the church is not an institution but an event that by the free grace of God in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit must continually happen afresh in order that there may be the true church of Jesus Christ'.[9]

This way of speaking is useful in that it reminds us that the church can only exist as God intends it to be, by God's grace and through faith in Christ. It is continually tempted to turn aside from that grace, to live by its own institutional strength and human wisdom. But as often as it turns away from God's grace it must be reminded to repent and to turn in faith again to God. Only at those moments when it does that, will it be the church God intended.

Nevertheless, this manner of speaking has to be rejected also. It replaces the old visible-invisible distinction by a time-event distinction. It would be like saying that a person is only a Christian at those specific moments when with full faith in Jesus Christ, he or she acts in obedience and love. There is no ground for this on-again, off-again definition of a Christian, nor of the church. The Scriptures do not speak in this way.

The church's mission

It is impossible to understand what the church is without considering the church's mission. The church is not an end in itself.

It is not a holy huddle. It is called into being for a purpose, and that purpose is participation in God's mission.

'The church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.'[10] So wrote the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, many years ago. What he intended was much more than the trite observation that a church that does not keep making new members will die, though that is true. Brunner meant that it is of the very nature of the church to be about God's mission, just as it is of the very nature of fire to burn. A fire that is not burning is not a true fire, but only an imitation, a fake. So a church that is not at mission is only an imitation of what God intends it to be.

The church engages in mission basically in two ways: by its being and by its doing. The mission is seen too often as something added on, something that belongs to a special corner of the church's life. Conceived in this way, the mission will always be phoney. To be sure, mission involves doing, but it is always a doing that springs from, and is supported by, the church's being. When the church is genuinely a caring, supportive fellowship; when its members speak the truth in love, share each other's joys and sorrows, and participate in worship and sacraments with genuine gladness; and when the ecclesiastical institution is more concerned about justice and service than its own self-interest, then the church points the way to Christ by its own life and character.

Nevertheless, the missionary task of the church calls for action as well as being. While many things might be said about this action, it may, for simplicity, be divided into three categories.

Mission as worship

First, there is the church's life of praise and worship (*leitourgia*). For the eastern church, this is really the whole purpose of the church's existence - to worship God. Eastern Orthodox Christians would be unhappy with Brunner's remark quoted earlier. They would want to say that the church exists by worship just as a fire exists by burning.

While we might find it impossible to agree that worship totally fulfils the missionary calling of the church, we must at least recognise that all its other busyness is for nothing if the church is not itself a worshipping community, adoring God and by its worship inviting all people to enter into that relationship with God which finds expression in prayer and praise.

Mission as proclamation of the gospel

Secondly, the mission of the church takes the form of the proclamation of the gospel. The good news of God's love for all humanity, expressed in the gift of God's Son, Jesus Christ, is the

most precious thing entrusted to the church. If that treasure is simply locked up in the church, and not shared by faithful witness (*martyria*), the church is failing to fulfil its calling.

Just as Jesus coupled the good news of the kingdom of God with the call for repentance and faith in God, so too the church that is faithfully about its missionary task today will call people to conversion as the only adequate response to the gospel. This witness and proclamation is not just the task of a few paid professionals, but of all God's people. Nevertheless it is time for ministers of Word and sacrament to take with utmost seriousness the task and privilege of preaching the gospel Sunday by Sunday.

Mission as humble service

Thirdly, the missionary task of the church takes the form of humble service to the poor, the distressed and the oppressed (*diakonia*). At one level, this means helping those who are in need: orphans, the sick and disturbed, the homeless and the hungry. Thus it involves relief programs, material aid, education and development.

But it also goes beyond that. These things may only attack the symptoms while leaving the basic problems and causes untouched. They may only make the recipients of service more dependent than before. Therefore genuine Christian service goes beyond that to include such things as help in community organisation, so that the disadvantaged may be able to gain their rights in their own communities. It includes also solidarity with the oppressed as they seek to break out of structures of oppression and dependence on a global level.

A summary definition of the church

In the light of all that has been said so far, we are now in a position to offer, as a kind of summary, a short definition of the church. The definition I propose is the following:

> *The church is the fellowship of Christ's people, created and sustained by God, for mission.*

Of all the images of the church, that of fellowship is most fundamental for a definition. In all the great images, the horizontal relationship between the members is of great importance. This is supremely true of the body image and of those images which cluster around the idea of *koinonia*, but it is also implied in the notion of a people of God. But in this image the horizontal and vertical relationships are intertwined.

To speak of the church as a fellowship is not to reject form, structure and organisation, but these are secondary to that basic sharing together in the grace of Christ, the love of God and the

Holy Spirit, which makes of individuals a *koinonia*. Nor is it to neglect the vertical dimension, since without that the fellowship would not be a Christian *koinonia*.

To speak in this way is also to be faithful to the Reformation view of the church as the *communio sanctorum*, the community of the saints.

It is as the fellowship of Christ's people that the church is in hope one and catholic. Sadly, in reality it is not so. No denomination of the church can claim to be the one, catholic church in the present divided state of Christianity. It is only in hope that the church is one and universal.

The fellowship which is the church is created and sustained by the triune God. Whereas people create and dissolve fellowships of many kinds, the fellowship that is the church exists solely by the grace of God, and therefore outlasts the others. In the past, the basis of the church has been found almost exclusively in Christology, but in recent times the mission of God the Source and the role of the Spirit have received increased emphasis.

The church is dependent upon Christ's saving work, his call to discipleship, his Word, but these have their origin in the mission of the Father. And Christ's work only comes to fulfilment in the work of the Spirit which makes a people one body (1 Corinthians 12:13), one *koinonia*. It is only as the Spirit continues to work in and between people that the fellowship remains strong and genuinely a Christian fellowship.

It is always in danger of being disrupted by human sin. Even Christians have much sin remaining in them. Their selfishness and lovelessness must be continually corrected by the Spirit if they are not to offend one another and be offended. Thus, while the definition begins with the horizontal dimension (person to person, fellowship), the vertical dimension (person to God) is the more basic for the church's existence.

It is only because of this creative work of God that the church can be called holy and apostolic. It is holy, not because it is without sin, but because it trusts in Christ and shares in the Holy Spirit. It is apostolic because it hears and lives by the apostolic gospel and is sent into the world to share that gospel.

Finally, that fellowship, created and sustained by the triune God, has a purpose and it is only truly what God has created it to be when it is actively engaged in fulfilling that purpose by carrying out its divinely given mission in the world.

The sacraments

Sacraments are part of the corporate life and worship of the Christian church. In them, the gospel is proclaimed through visible symbols and actions, and those who are participating indicate at

the same time, by means of their own symbolic actions, their response to the gospel.

While we reserve the word sacrament for certain specific symbols and actions, in a broader sense it can be said that sacraments surround us everywhere. When two people shake hands on a business deal, they are engaging in a kind of secular sacrament, so are children at school when they salute the flag and pledge allegiance. When people get up and go out to the communion rail at an evangelistic meeting, they are engaging in a kind of sacrament.

Sacraments are a particularly sensitive area in inter-church relations because they are so intimately tied to the corporate life of the church and its good ordering. This sensitivity has been felt not only between Protestants and Catholics, but between Protestants themselves. There are signs, however, that the differences are narrowing and the tensions easing.

Ecumenical disagreements about the sacraments

With regard to the sacraments in general, there are two important points of disagreement. In the first place, Protestants and Catholics disagree on what the sacraments are. Since the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church has recognised seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Unction, Ordination to the priesthood, and Matrimony. Protestant churches recognise only Baptism and the Eucharist (Holy Communion), holding that these alone stand on the authority and institution of Christ.

A second area of disagreement concerns their basic nature and effectiveness. The extreme Protestant view is that they are only signs of something else that has taken place, or takes place, independently of them. Thus baptism is just a sign of a faith and a regeneration that has taken place in a spiritual relationship between the one who has come to believe and his or her Lord. On the other hand, the extreme high church view maintains that they are efficacious simply by virtue of the fact that they are performed by a priest of the church in accordance with the institution of the sacrament.

Protestantism derived from the Genevan Reformation has rejected both views in favour of a mediating position which holds that a sacrament is not magical, and therefore is not efficacious just because the actions are performed, but neither is it just a sign. It is a symbol which is an effective means of grace when it is received by faith.

To illustrate the difference, let us take the case of a person who is challenged by the message at an evangelistic meeting, leaves her place with her friends at the invitation of the evangelist, walks

down the aisle and prays at the communion rail. It would be false to say that she was converted and born anew by the process of walking from one spot to another and kneeling at a rail. It would be equally false to say that the movement was really unnecessary and was only a sign of something that had taken place quite separately. If that were the case, altar calls would be pointless.

The process of leaving friends, getting up, walking to the front was part of the process of decision and commitment which is called conversion, and without the challenge to do that, and the actual doing of it, nothing might have happened. The rationale of the sacrament is similar. God's gracious offer calls forth a human response and where they meet God's promise is really fulfilled.

Baptism

The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is in connection with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. We know from other sources that the Jews used to baptise proselytes (that is, people who were converted to the Jewish faith though they were of different racial origin) and that this practice probably goes back beyond John the Baptist. If that is the case, John was applying to Jews themselves a ritual of cleansing which they applied to Gentile converts. It was as if he were saying, 'You are all as bad as the Gentiles; you need to be cleansed from your sin, and to dedicate yourselves to a new life, just as surely as they do'.

Before commencing his own ministry, Jesus came to John and was baptised in the Jordan. This raised a problem in the early church: Why was the greater (Jesus) baptised by the lesser (John)? This is the problem addressed in Matthew 3:14-15.

For us, the baptism of Jesus raises a different problem - one which apparently did not trouble the gospel writers: If Jesus was sinless, why did he receive from John a baptism for the forgiveness of sins? The answer usually given is that it was in this way that Jesus demonstrated from the beginning of his public ministry his total identification with sinful people, whom he had come to save. John's baptism, however, was not only for the forgiveness of sins; it was also a baptism of people committed to moral purity and loyal obedience to the will and purpose of God. So in this way Jesus indicated his own dedication.

Jesus' baptism was marked by two other special events: the Spirit descended upon him and he heard a voice from heaven confirming him as God's beloved Son.

According to the gospel narratives, Jesus did not carry on the program of John the Baptist, and it was not until after his death and resurrection that the disciples began to baptise again, and then they did it in the name of the Lord Jesus, though, before the New

Testament was completed, baptism must have been in the threefold name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). This reflects the developing conviction of the church that in Jesus, and in the Spirit given at baptism, God the Father is uniquely present and active.

The renewal of the practice of baptism in the early church probably does go back to a specific direction from Jesus, such as we find in Matthew 28:19-20, though most scholars doubt that these are the actual words Jesus used.

Christian baptism retained some of the significance of John's baptism. It was regarded as a washing and a cleansing from sin and was associated with repentance and commitment to a new way of life, which was represented by Jesus (Acts 2:38, 41). Certain new things were also added. It was recognised as the sacramental act by which people became incorporated into the community of believers, the church. Associated with baptism was the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. What was prefigured at the baptism of Jesus in the descent of the Spirit upon him became a regular characteristic of Christian baptism.

Christian baptism also became linked very strongly with the death and resurrection of Jesus, so that one can even say that the primary meaning of baptism is participation in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-11), and the symbolic act of baptism is that of dying, being buried and rising again, even more than that of being washed and cleansed.[12]

The baptism of infants

Primarily it was adults who were baptised, on repentance and profession of faith in Christ. We cannot say for sure how, or when, the baptism of small children began. We only know that at the end of the second century Tertullian produced a *Treatise on Baptism* in which he argued against the practice, which implies that it was sufficiently common to call for such a protest. However, it does not seem to have become very widespread until the fourth or fifth centuries.

We can only imagine how it started. As the Christian mission progressed there were soon many Christian adults who had children born after their own conversion. Since baptism was the invariable sign of being joined with Christ and being members of the church, it must have seemed to these parents that their families were divided; they belonged to Christ and were members of the household of God, while their children were still members of the pagan society. Naturally they would have asked if their children could be baptised also, so that the whole family might be together in the new society of which Christ was head.

We can imagine that such requests would have caused much serious thought in the congregations. Probably in some places it would have been decided that such baptisms would be improper. In other places it must have been decided that there was biblical and theological justification for them.

Justification for baptising infants might have been given on various grounds. At various places in the New Testament, it is said that households were baptised, and, though it cannot be proved beyond doubt, it is unlikely there were not small children in the households (Acts 16:15,33-34;18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Certainly if there were it is unthinkable that they would have been excluded.[13]

It might be justified by drawing a parallel with circumcision in the Old Testament, and by the argument that grace always precedes faith and hence baptism may symbolise God's acceptance of the child even before the child can signify its response of faith. It might be justified by the fact that the child of believing parents is consecrated by the parents' faith (1 Corinthians 7:14) and by the fact that Jesus is recorded to have received and blessed infants during his ministry. Whatever the arguments were, children were baptised, and in time the baptism of children became more common than the baptism of adults.

The reformers did not challenge this practice but continued to baptise infants. The radical wing of the Reformation, known as the Anabaptists, did reject the practice, and baptised only those of mature age who professed the faith. Their aim was to restrict membership of the church, as far as possible, to the regenerate. Thus, while in the greater part of the Christian church today most baptisms involve infants, there are a number of denominations, such as Baptists, Brethren, Mennonites and Pentecostals, in which only people of mature age may be baptised on profession of faith.

It is to be noted, however, that the indiscriminate baptism of infants and the reduction of the rite, in many instances, to a social custom and a mere formality, is now producing a strong reaction against the baptism of infants, even in churches which have always practised it.

Churches which reject the baptism of infants argue that the practice is not to be found in the New Testament and therefore is unscriptural. They also emphasise the need for repentance and faith in connection with baptism. Some at least would see baptism as basically something we do rather than something God does. Those who baptise infants would regard baptism first of all as an expression of what God has done in Christ, and what God does again and again in making the grace of Christ available to all.

Those who baptise infants argue that even if no conclusive answer can be given to the question whether infants were baptised

in the earliest days of the church according to the New Testament, the extension of baptism to infants is, at least in some circumstances, theologically justifiable. They would argue that there is a basic continuity between God's covenant in the Old Testament and that in the New.

God did not have a change of mind, or begin to deal with people in a totally new way. What is new is the replacement of the old sacrifices with a new and perfect sacrifice and the offer of God's covenant of grace to all peoples. They would go on to argue that just as in the Old Testament God's covenant with people clearly includes their children, so it does in the New Testament, and as circumcision was a sign of this in the Old Testament, so baptism may legitimately be in the New.

Baptists reject this argument. They argue either for a fundamental discontinuity between the covenants, or for the view that no parallel can be drawn between circumcision and baptism.

A full discussion of the arguments for and against baptism of infants would require a great deal more space than we can give to it here. There are weighty arguments on both sides, and it is time for both parties to listen to each other with a great deal more tolerance and respect.

The position adopted by this writer is that the extension of baptism to infants, in certain circumstances, is warranted because the baptism of children is congruent with, and gives clear expression to the New Testament truth that grace precedes faith, and that faith is the response to God's grace, not its condition. The important thing in baptism is what God does, not what we do, and that is so whether the one baptised is a child or an adult. We do not choose God; God claims us, and, by grace, calls us before we ever seek God.

Nevertheless, God's action does require our response. In the case of the baptism of a confessing adult, that response is made at the time of baptism and must continue for the whole of life; in the case of a small child, it must follow some time later, perhaps in an event such as confirmation. To that extent, the baptism of a confessing adult is the norm, however infrequently it occurs, and the baptism of an infant is a departure from it, permissible and even making clear something which is not so clear in the baptism of adults, but nevertheless it is away from the norm.

It must be said, therefore, that the baptism of infants can only be permitted and not required. This must be said against those who speak as though failure to have a child baptised is a scandal in the church, and even a sin, and it must be said in support of an increasing number of parents who, for conscientious reasons, decide not to have their children baptised.

Also a warning needs to be sounded that baptism is not appropriate in the case of every child any more than it would be in the case of every adult. There must be some indication that baptism is appropriate. In the case of an adult, the indication that baptism is warranted is the person's confession of faith and desire to be a member of the Body of Christ. It would be unthinkable to baptise an adult who said that he or she did not believe and had no intention of being a member of the church.

The decision in the case of small children is very difficult. Originally, only the children of Christian parents would have been baptised. That was very easily determined in a basically pagan society, but in a christendom situation it is not easy at all. The difficulty of it, however, does not absolve the church from the responsibility of making a decision. In a society in which christening has become and remains a social convention, the mere request for a christening does not, in itself, indicate that baptism is appropriate.

The mode of Baptism

Another matter which has been the centre of controversy is the mode of baptism, whether it should be by total immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. It is generally agreed that total immersion best preserves the symbolism of dying and rising again with Christ, but other modes do not invalidate the sacrament, any more than failure to use the same kind of bread that Jesus used and the same kind of wine from a single cup invalidates the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The Eucharist or Holy Communion

The Eucharist was instituted by Jesus during his last meal with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. The thorough and extensive work of J. Jeremias has established that this was a Passover meal.[14] In that context, the words of institution preserved for us in the gospels, and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, give us reasonably clear guidelines about how the rite was observed and understood in the early church. Nevertheless, this sacrament also has been the centre of much disagreement on a number of issues, specifically whether the term sacrifice can be applied to the Supper and whether and how Christ is really present in the sacrament.

It was Cyprian who began to speak of the Eucharist as a sacrifice. He was anxious to interpret the ministry of the church in terms of priesthood analogous with the priesthood of the Old Testament. The question then arose about what sacrifice the priest

of the church offered. His answer was that it was the sacrifice of Christ's passion set forth again in the Eucharist.

This understanding of the Mass persisted for a long time in the Roman Catholic Church but was vigorously repudiated by Protestants. In recent times, Catholic theologians have differed amongst themselves on the matter, though the general tendency now is to deny that the Mass either repeats or supplements the sacrifice of Christ.

On the Protestant side, there has come a recognition that, in biblical thought, a memorial is much more than a banal memento. In Hebrew thought, the ritual recalling of a past event makes it powerful in the present situation. It does not actually repeat the mighty deeds of God from the past, but it makes present the saving benefit of them, so that they may be appropriated now. With these two developments, the difference between Protestants and Catholics on this issue has largely been bridged.

Differences still persist on the issue of the real presence, as it is usually referred to. It was really the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice which led to the contention that the substance of the bread and wine is really changed into that of the body and blood of Christ. This idea was first set forth in a treatise by St Paschasius, a Benedictine theologian, in 831. He maintained that the flesh born of Mary, which suffered on the cross and rose again, was miraculously multiplied by God and made spiritually present in the elements of each consecration.

It was not far from here to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The term appears to have come into use early in the twelfth century. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 stated that Christ's body and blood are really contained in the sacrament under the species of bread and wine, the bread being transubstantiated into the body and the wine into the blood by the power of God.

This has remained the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not easily understood today, because it depends upon Aristotelian philosophical concepts which are foreign to our way of thinking. Catholic theologians themselves recognise this fact and are searching for ways to re-express what they believe to be the truth of the doctrine in modern terms.

The views of the reformers

The reformers rejected this understanding of the mode of Christ's presence. The most extreme position was taken by Zwingli, who held that the Eucharist was simply a memorial of Christ's death and that the bread and wine were no more than signs of his broken body and shed blood. Zwingli did believe that Christ was spiritually present to faith in the Eucharist.

Early in the piece, Luther was not greatly concerned about the manner of Christ's presence. He wrote: 'I have often enough asserted that I do not argue whether the wine remains wine or not. It is enough for me that Christ's blood is present; let it be with the wine as God wills'.[15] Later, in reaction to the radical reformers, who wanted the bread and wine as signs only, he began to place greater emphasis on the real presence and developed his own rationale to explain it. According to his view, which is referred to as consubstantiation, the bread and wine remain bread and wine, but after the consecration the flesh and blood of Christ coexist in them, just as in Christ the deity dwelt in the untransformed human nature.

Calvin sought a middle way between Zwingli and the Lutherans. He maintained that Christ was truly present in the Eucharist, but not by any union with the elements. When the believer received the consecrated bread and wine, he ate only bread and wine, but at the same time he or she truly received Christ's body and blood. Thus, though the bread and wine were signs, they were not mere signs, but the means by which Christ was really present.

Wendel summarises the difference between Calvin and the Lutherans as follows:

> *Union between the Christ and the Eucharistic elements meant, according to the Lutherans, that there was a real contact between the body and the blood on the one hand, and the bread and wine on the other: according to Calvin, it meant only that the believer received the body of Christ when he consumed the consecrated bread ... The Lutherans therefore maintained that there was a direct relation between the Christ and the elements; Calvin, on the contrary, put the Christ and the elements separately into direct contact with the believer.*[16]

In recent years, there have been numerous attempts from both sides to bridge the gulf between Roman Catholics and Protestants. One promising way is the concept of transsignification. The Protestant, F. J. Leenhardt, has pointed out that when Christ gives the bread with the words, 'This is my body', the bread is no longer in its deepest constitution what the baker made it, but what the Word has made it. Another theologian has illustrated this idea with the example of pieces of cloth which are sewn up into a flag. Once it is sewn up in a particular fashion it is not longer just a piece of cloth, but very much more, for it has a totally new significance.

On the Catholic side, Abbot Vonier has argued that while the sacrament may be called a sign, its God-conferred sacramental character makes present and effective that which it represents. The

body and blood of Christ are present in the Eucharist by virtue of the fact that Christ has made the bread and the wine the sacramental signs of them, and that is all that needs to be said. There are, however, other Roman Catholic theologians who feel such an explanation is insufficient.

The meaning of Holy Communion

Holy Communion is so rich in symbolism and meaning that it is difficult to gather it all together in a few statements, but briefly, and very inadequately, we can say the following things about it.

1. It is a memorial of Christ's suffering and death ('Do this in remembrance of me'). As mentioned above, it is not a memorial simply in the banal sense of a memento. In biblical thought, a memorial has a dynamic quality. The ritual recalling of a past event makes it powerful again in the present situation. Thus the memorial of Christ's death makes present the saving benefit of his sacrifice so that it may be appropriated by those who receive the sacrament.
2. It is a proclamation of Christ's death ('For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death ...'). So it is a kind of acted sermon. In a time when it is being contended that fewer and fewer people have the cast of mind to receive and appreciate the spoken message, it is all the more important that the message of Christ's death and resurrection for us should be proclaimed visually, and in actions in which people themselves participate.
3. It is a communion with Christ (John 6:56; 1 Corinthians 10:16). This is what all the talk about the real presence is intended to underline. That is not to say that there is no communion with Christ at other times and in other ways, but here communion is sharply focused, so that we may have grounds for a sure confidence.
   What is more, communion with Christ here becomes a corporate rather than just a private and individualistic reality. That is why Holy Communion is so constitutive of the church. As one theologian has said: 'Communion with Christ turns the church into a body, His body; for this reason the church could not exist without the Eucharist'.[17]
4. It is a communion of Christians with one another. Matthew 5:24 ('Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister...') has always been cited in connection with Holy Communion. This sacrament should be a realisation in miniature of a true Christian society. It was because the Corinthians were failing so dismally at this point that Paul

had to speak very sharply to them (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). We all deserve a like rebuke. While ever Christians remain separated from one another at the Eucharist by denominational differences, every church's Eucharist is marred and defective.

5. It is an expectation and anticipation of the Messianic Banquet when God's kingdom is consummated. ('... you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'). In the early church, the Maranatha (Come, Lord) prayer was always associated with the Eucharist and it is returning in new forms in some modern liturgies. To expect the consummation, however, is not to wait for it passively, but to reach out for it now, and to bring as much of it as we can into the world right now. For that reason, the Lord's table has always been the place where all distinctions are rendered void. The rich and the poor, the noble-born and the commoner, the black and the white come together and are equal. If it is genuine, of course, it will not end there but will be carried by the communicants out into the world.
6. It is a feeding on the bread of life (John 6:33-35). The receiving of the bread and wine signifies the receiving of Christ by faith, for the further nourishment of our faith and the strengthening of our Christian life.
7. It is an act of prayer. We give thanks for all that God has done, particularly in redeeming humankind. Eucharist means thanksgiving, and so we give thanks for all that God has done for us through Christ. We also call upon the Holy Spirit to make the Supper and Christ's sacrifice effective in our lives. We also pray for the coming of the kingdom and we intercede for the world.
8. It is the offering of ourselves in service and sacrifice for Christ in the world. An older liturgy puts it in these words: 'Here we offer and present unto Thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto Thee'. All complete liturgies include such a commitment. The very action of receiving bread and wine cannot be a selfish getting of something for ourselves, but always a means by which we are nourished for service.

In the light of the richness of its meaning it is understandable why the Eucharist has been so central in the life of the church from its beginning. It is the complete act of worship.

Ministry

Many attempts have been made to arrive at an understanding of ministry through a study of the role of the disciples of Jesus. Some people have even argued that since the disciples were all male, the

ordained ministry of the church should be limited to men. The argument is false. If it proved anything, it would be that only men can be disciples, a conclusion which most people would recognise to be absurd. The argument is false also because the disciples represent the wrong starting point for developing a doctrine of ministry.

The ministry of Jesus

If we wish to understand ministry in the church today, it is with Jesus that we must begin. James Dunn makes the point as follows:

> *Discipleship meant 'following' Jesus. He alone was prophet and teacher. The only real authority, the only real ministry was his. And he encouraged his disciples on some occasions at least to exorcise demons and to preach the good news of the kingdom, this was no more than Jesus pursuing his mission by proxy ... Any concept or pattern of ministry must be derived from Jesus alone, since it cannot be derived from the disciples or the twelve round Jesus.*[18]

To say that we must begin with the ministry of Jesus is not just a pious statement which, once made for the sake of appearance, can then be forgotten. On the contrary, this is the only safe and proper basis from which to approach the subject. If we want to know what ministry is about, we must look to him.

In his life on earth, he ministered both to his disciples and to those people who simply came to him in their need. He offered people the good news freely; he became a friend to those who needed friendship, he healed the sick. He was a teacher and prophet, but he was also a priest in that he interceded for his disciples and the nation, and sacrificed his life for them. To those who followed him, he was also Master and Lord, and though he did not exercise his authority in the autocratic manner of most leaders, he did have authority. So it can be said that he exercised his ministry as prophet, priest and king.

He still exercises this ministry in the church through his Word and Spirit. He is the teacher of the church, the prophet to whom it looks for the truth by which to live. It is he who forgives sins and delivers people from the power of evil. He is our advocate on high and thus the church's one great high priest. Through the Spirit he seeks to guide and direct the church, and hence he is the church's one true king.

There is a certain artificiality about these titles, but it is important to ascribe them to Christ lest anyone in the church be given, or assume, the role of final arbiter of truth, or the role of great high priest, or authoritative ruler. Christ alone can assume these roles and yet remain completely the servant of all.

The ministry of all Christ's people

After speaking of the ministry of Christ, it must be said next that ministry in the church means the ministry of the whole church - the ministry of all its members. The church is a servant people. Many of the images for the church used in the New Testament underline this fact.

There are three great passages in particular which speak of the ministry of the members. Firstly, there is 1 Corinthians 12-14. In so far as Christians are genuinely members of the body, they are endowed by the Spirit with gifts (*charismata*). There is no such thing as a passive Christian - one who has no gift, and who therefore can only receive ministry from others. All have something to contribute to the common life, and therefore have a responsibility to minister.

The other side of the picture is that no one possesses all the gifts, and therefore no one can have a monopoly on ministry. If anyone tries to do that, or is expected to do that, the whole body will be impoverished. The same view is expressed in Romans 12:3-13. The diversity of gifts and ministries in the church is also indicated in Ephesians 4:11-12.

In 1 Peter 2:9, the church is spoken of as a royal priesthood, and hence within Protestantism we speak of the priesthood of all believers. This does not mean, as it has sometimes been misunderstood, that everyone can do his or her own thing, but that everyone can be minister to brother or sister in the faith.

The ministry of appointed leaders

Thirdly, we find in the New Testament that special ministries were committed to certain approved and appointed individuals. These people were referred to as bishops (or overseers), elders (presbyters), and deacons. They are to be distinguished from apostles, who held a unique position, and from other individuals such as prophets, who exercised their ministry because of their acknowledged gift, and not because of appointment.

It is not easy to locate the precise time at which these ministries arose. Probably the church at Jerusalem, organising itself along the same lines as the synagogue, had a council of elders almost from the beginning (Acts 11:30; 15:2). However, this was probably more like a board of management than a team ministry as we would think of it.

In the undisputed letters of Paul and in his general conception of church order, there is a striking absence of ordered ministries or formal offices. In Philippians alone is there even any mention of bishops and deacons, and there is no mention of elders at all. The bishops and deacons which he mentions would appear to

constitute something like a church council, rather than a team of ministers.

It is only in the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) that something like an ordained ministry begins to appear (though it is still too early to speak of ordination as we know it). Many scholars doubt that these letters were actually written by Paul but if they were, it was very late in his life and represented a viewpoint substantially different from that which he expressed in earlier letters.

These letters mention bishops, elders and deacons, but the general view is that bishops and elders are the same and that deacon is probably not yet a technical term but can be applied to any person as a servant within the church. Still, these letters do show that by the time they were written, at least one ministerial office had been more firmly established than we have evidence of anywhere else in the New Testament.

The minister here is equipped and enabled for the work by a special gift accompanying the laying-on of hands (1 Timothy 4:14). The minister was paid (1 Timothy 5:17), but additional employment was not ruled out. The chief duties of the minister were preaching (1 Timothy 4:11), teaching by example and precept (1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7), and presiding over the church and exercising discipline (1 Timothy 1:3; 3:4-5; 2 Timothy 2:15; Titus 3:10-11).

Some people regard this development as most regrettable, and a serious departure from the pure Christian understanding of ministry as we find it, for example, in 1 Corinthians, but, as we have already remarked, it was a step forced upon the church by the end of the apostolic era and by attempted subversion from the pagan world. To guard against dangerous perversions of the Christian story and Christian life, and to maintain the unity of the church, it was necessary to appoint tried and tested leaders in each congregation as a point of reference and unity, and to exercise oversight and discipline.

The development of ministries after the New Testament period

In the post-New Testament church, the position of the appointed ministry grew stronger. By the time of Ignatius in the first quarter of the second century, supreme authority in each congregation was beginning to be exercised by a single minister, the bishop.

Around the end of the first century, the concept of apostolic succession was beginning to develop, and by early in the third century (Cyprian), the bishop and presbyters were beginning to be regarded as priests after the pattern of the priesthood of the Old Testament. In time bishops became heads of districts or dioceses and presbyters became known as priests.

While the reformers rejected many of the developments described above, they continued to accord to the ministry of the ordained a very important place in the life of the church.

No commonly accepted title was ever accorded to ministers of Word and sacraments in the churches that grew out of the Reformation. There is much to be said for recovering the ancient title of 'presbyter', especially in these days when the diaconate as a permanent and equal order is being reintroduced in many churches. This is the title I shall use from here on.

In practice, presbyters have tended to gather all ministries into their one ministry, and that produces congregations of passive lay people. This is the most regrettable result of that development which we see beginning in the Pastoral Epistles, and if we are not to dispense with the rest of the New Testament witness about ministry, it is a development which must be reversed. Indeed, unless it is, the life and health of the church is in danger.

However, those who would dispense with a ministry of ordained people altogether, whether bishops, presbyters or deacons, have yet to demonstrate, either in theory or in practice, that the church can thrive without it.

Presbyters and deacons have an important service to offer in and through the church, but it is a limited service, which leaves room for the service of all other members. Presbyters are charged with the specific service of oversight. They are to see that all gifts are recognised and all ministries in the congregation are exercised in a full and orderly fashion. For those who set store by the pattern of, and parallelism with, the ministry of Jesus, this is the presbyter's kingly office.

The presbyter is also responsible for communicating the Christian story faithfully, and for relating contemporary events to that story. This is the prophetic office. The presbyter takes responsibility for the public worship of the congregation and presides at the sacraments. This is the priestly office. He or she is also to be skilled in relating to people in trouble and in exercising pastoral care.

The office of deacon has a different focus from that of the presbyter. It is a servant ministry directed largely to those outside the congregation. It is not meant to replace the servant ministries of all the people of God but is rather to be a symbol and focus for them. Within the congregation, deacons reflect theologically with all the people on what it means to serve and witness in the community and will encourage others to join with them in their servant ministry.[19]

These two ministries still leave a vast area of caring service and witness, both within the congregation and outside, to be taken up

by lay people. In fact, as already mentioned above, a significant task of both the presbyter and the deacon is to encourage all the members of the congregation in the ministries for which they are gifted.

It needs to be emphasised that no hard and fast division exists between ministers and laity. Even this contrast of minister and lay person is unfortunate. Ministers also are included in the people (the *laos*) of God, like everyone else in the congregation. Ordination does not lift them to another plane of being, or constitute a new species of creature. Ministers remain ordinary human beings, in need of ministry from others just as much as any other person.

Perhaps nothing has so separated ministry and laity as the false assumption that the minister is a kind of super Christian who has reached a stage beyond the need for caring service from others. In addition to fostering a false view of the ministry, this idea has imposed an intolerable burden of isolation and self-sufficiency on ministers and their families.

Fortunately, there are now signs that the whole concept of ministry is being re-examined in the light of the New Testament and subsequent history. If this leads to further reform, it will benefit ministers and laity alike as well as the life of the church as a whole.

Notes

[1] P. Minear: *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Lutterworth Press, 1961.
[2] H. Berkhof: *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Epworth Press, 1964, p. 50.
[3] P. Minear: *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, pp. 162-163.
[4] P. Althaus: *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 287, 289.
[5] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, S.C.M. Press, 1960, 4.1.4.
[6] J Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.7.
[7] J. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9.
[8] C. Welch: *The Reality of the Church, Charles Scribner's Sons*, 1958, p. 21.
[9] H. Hartwell: *The Theology of Karl Barth*, Westminster, 1964, p. 144.
[10] I believe that Brunner wrote this in *The Word and the World*, S.C.M. Press, 1931, but it has been repeated by many people since Brunner wrote it.
[11] In this regard, John H. Leith: *The Reformed Imperative - What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*, Westminster Press, 1988, is to be highly recommended to preachers.
[12] For further discussion of the meaning of baptism, readers are referred to the World Council of Churches document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982. Also highly recommended is William H. Willimon: *Remember Who You Are: Baptism a Model for Christian Life*, The Upper Room, 1980.
[13] The case of the gaoler and his family is particularly interesting. Acts 16:34 says that the entire household 'rejoiced that he had become a believer'. Nothing is said about the belief of the other members. On the basis that he had come to faith, they were all baptised. How young the youngest children were, we do not know, but whatever their age they were all baptised. If there were infants, it is simply unthinkable that they would have been excluded. Can anyone imagine Paul saying, only those over five please? The argument that the baptism of infants of believers is not to be found in the New Testament is exceedingly weak.
[14] J. Jeremias: *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1966.
[15] M. Luther: *Luther's Works*, Vol. 37, Muhlenberg Press, 1961, p. 317.
[16] O. Wendel: *Calvin*, Harper & Row, 1963, p. 344.
[17] J. von Allmen: *The Lord's Supper*, Lutterworth, 1969, pp. 59-60.
[18] J.D.G. Dunn: *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, S.C.M. Press, 1977, p. 106.
[19] For an understanding of the Diaconate see J.M. Barnett: *The Diaconate - A Full and Equal Order*, Trinity Press International, 1995, and Christine Hall, Ed.: *The Deacon's Ministry*, Gracewing, 1991.

13
The Christian life

The beginning of the Christian life

When does the Christian life begin? And where should a theology of the Christian life begin? Many answers present themselves for consideration. Should we begin with repentance, conversion, justification? Or should we go back further, say to Jesus - his life, his death and resurrection and the sending of the Spirit? None of these answers would be wrong, but I want to suggest that an appropriate place to begin is with baptism.

This may be a surprising suggestion. Even though matters related to baptism are discussed heatedly in the church, most people probably do not ascribe a lot of importance to baptism. Our view of baptism would be very different if we lived in a society in which other living faiths were numerically strong. In such a situation, there is no doubt that baptism is the beginning of one's life as a Christian.

When I worked in Indonesia, I knew a number of Moslems who chose to become Christians. Their intention to embrace a new faith was known to family and friends well in advance, but it was only at the point of baptism that they were ostracised by family and friends and crossed over into a new family and a new community.

It is clear that this is also the New Testament view. Whatever experiences people have or whatever their intentions and desires may be, it is baptism that signifies that the old life is truly past and a new life has begun. It was so on the day of Pentecost; it was so with Saul, Cornelius, the Philippian gaoler and many more in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the way that is universally set forth as

the means of breaking with the past and entering into the Christian community and into new life in Christ.

The prevalence of the baptism of infants clouds the matter for us. How, we may ask, can baptism be the beginning of the Christian life for babies? It may be, and often is, a beginning that does not reach any fulfilment, but if we believe in the efficacy of prayer at all and in the promises of God, we cannot doubt that even for tiny children baptism is a beginning.

The significance of Baptism

When we identify baptism as the beginning of the Christian life, we bear in mind the following points:

1. It is primarily God who acts in baptism. In baptism, we are claimed and set within the covenant of grace. All the promises of God are sealed and delivered to us personally. We are placed under the baptism that Jesus was baptised with once and for all on Golgotha. Baptism underlines the primacy of God's grace. Apart from that grace, the Christian life is impossible. It is either an expression of, and response to, that grace, or it is nothing.
2. Baptism is related to the gift of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is promised in baptism and we pray for the fulfilment of that promise and we trust that God hears and responds to our prayers. Once again, apart from this gift of the Spirit the Christian life is an impossibility. Baptism reminds us of this, but more importantly the gift of the Spirit in baptism is the first divine impulse in our lives towards the life of faith.
3. Baptism joins us to the Christian fellowship, the church. Apart from this community also, the Christian life is unthinkable. The Christian life is not a solitary life. It is livable only within the context of the community of believers. Vernard Eller makes the point that you cannot start with the lifestyle of the individual Christian and move from there to the church. Establishing the right kind of community and relating to it is the most critical factor in generating authentic Christian lives.[1]
4. Baptism tells us who we are. In a world in which people have all kinds of understanding about what it means to be a human being, it is easy to be confused about who we are. We need to be reminded constantly about who we really are. To those who are uncertain about the way to live, the New Testament repeatedly offers the injunction to be who you are.

   But who are we? In 1 Corinthians 6:11, St Paul tells the Corinthians, 'you were washed (that is baptised), you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God'. That is who they were and

it was as such people that they were to live. To the Romans he wrote, 'do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death?' It was their baptism that told the Romans who they were and hence how they were to live.

So baptism is very appropriately the beginning of the Christian life, but of course it is not the be all and end all of Christian living. There are many more things to be appropriated and more steps to take before the Christian life comes to its fruition.

Conversion

Conversion is an essential feature of the Christian life. That is not to say that there is in the life of every believer a sudden and dramatic about-turn. For some it is gradual and almost imperceptible, more evident in retrospect than at the time. Yet even if it is impossible to fix the date, there is a time in every Christian's life when conversion occurred. Whatever the nature of the turning may be, it is an orientation of one's life in a new and particular direction.

The noun conversion is found in the New Testament only in Acts 15:3. The verb is found in several places, where it is translated as convert in the *Authorised Version* but as turn in later translations. The latter is an improvement, since the word convert has changed considerably in meaning since the time of King James. Also the *Authorised Version* sometimes has a passive where in the Greek the verb is active (Matthew 13:15; 18:3; Mark 4:12; Luke 22:32; John 12:40; Acts 3:19; 28:27). In some of these cases, the idea of turning is not quite what we have in mind when we speak of conversion but there are instances where turn or convert is used in the full sense of a religious conversion (for example Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:9).

As well as the use of the word, the fact of conversion is presented many times in the gospels and Acts, for example Luke 7:47 (the adulterous woman), Luke 19:8 (Zacchaeus), Luke 23:42 (the penitent criminal), Acts 2:41 (the crowd at Pentecost), Acts 8:5-13 (the crowd who heard Phillip), Acts 9 (Paul), etc.

It is clear from a study of the texts that conversion, as distinct from regeneration, is a change of orientation seen from the point of view of the person's own activity. Karl Barth speaks of it as the lifting up of ourselves in spite of the downward drag of our slothful nature, by means of the freedom we are given in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Conversion is a waking up, because we are awakened.[2]

Of course, Barth knows that those who are awakened, and therefore wake up, can easily doze off again, and so they are

continually in need of being reawakened. He also recognises that people cannot awaken themselves. The jolt or shock that awakens comes from outside. Nevertheless, conversion itself is our waking and rising up.

Conversion does not achieve its goal in an instant. It is rather a getting off the wrong track onto the right track, so that instead of moving away from God, we move towards God. It is not simply a matter of improvement; what is required is a totally new direction. Bonhoeffer somewhere remarks that if you are on the wrong train, it is no use running as fast as you can down the corridor in the opposite direction. You need to get off that train and onto the right train.

Conversion has to do with the whole person. It involves relationships within the family and with other human beings as well as our relationship with God. It is not something that belongs to a little private and religious sphere of life. It is a matter of heart, mind, will, dispositions and action. Not all of these things may change in one event. We may be in need of many turnings in our lifetime as different parts of our being are handed over to Christ through the Spirit.

Repentance

Repentance and conversion are more closely related than they may appear. Conversion, as we have seen, means a turning to a new direction, and repentance in the New Testament means literally a change of mind. It is not simply a feeling of remorse or regret at having acted in a certain way, though that is necessarily involved. One may feel sorry for having acted in a certain way, because of some unpleasant consequence, such as being caught and punished, without having any resolve to turn away from the evil involved. So it is by concrete actions rather than by any expressions of regret that repentance is to be judged.

On the other hand, as John Cowburn points out, one might resolve not to commit some moral evil in the future and yet say of some past act, I am glad that I did what I did. I shall always remember it with pleasure, though I know it was wrong. Still, once was enough and I shall not risk it again. In such a case, it is not really possible to speak of repentance. About the past evil act there has been no change of mind. There is the will-to-have-done what was done. Only when the person can say, 'I wish I had not done that because it was contrary to the will of God, and I shall not do it again', is there true repentance.[3]

Repentance and conversion may be seen as two sides of the same coin or the one thing looked at in two different ways. Repentance emphasises the turn away from evil while conversion

highlights the aspect of turning to God, the one who justifies us freely. If we need to repent daily, we also need to turn back to God daily. The initial conversion to God may have a special significance but the many conversions that follow are just as important.

Regeneration

If conversion is our waking up, regeneration is God's awakening of us. When Jesus said to the paralysed man, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk', it would have been a mockery if he had not first healed the man of his paralysis. The man's ability to walk was utterly dependent on his receiving healing at the hands of Jesus, and thus his becoming physically a new person. So our ability to convert, or turn to God, depends totally upon our release from those things which hold us in our old ways and our old orientation. That is regeneration.[4]

The term regeneration occurs in the New Testament only twice (Matthew 19:28; Titus 3:5) but the idea is thoroughly scriptural. A great many different terms are used to describe the one reality, for example, new birth (John 3:3ff; 1 John 3:9), new creation (2 Corinthians 5:16f), renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2), death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-14, Ephesians 2:5), putting on Christ or the new nature (Colossians 3:10), etc.

The need for regeneration and the promise of it are prominent in the Old Testament (Psalm 51; Isaiah 65:17-25; Jeremiah 31:3lf; Jeremiah 32:38-40; Ezekiel 36:25-28). The far-reaching nature of the change is indicated by the terms used. Being born again is something much more radical than turning over a new leaf. That is why it is not in a person's power to produce it. Nicodemus questions the possibility of it, and when the disciples ask Jesus following the incident of the rich young ruler, 'Then who can be saved?' he replies, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible' (Mark 10:27).

New birth is, therefore, a miracle of divine grace. It is likened to the work of God in raising Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:18-22; 2:1-6). It is the saving action of God in Jesus Christ, and the declaration of that good news which is the instrument by which renewal is begun. This is the awakening shock which Barth speaks about.

Discipleship

The call to awake is also the call, 'Follow me!' It is a call to discipleship. The new waking life of the Christian is not just an aimless or empty being awake, like labourers who wait idly in the market place all day because no one has hired them. It is a waking

up to a definite and purposeful action. In one way or another, the people whose lives Jesus touches are all called to discipleship, not necessarily by joining the twelve, but by confessing Jesus and by living a life of faith and thankfulness.

It is important to note, as Barth points out, that discipleship is not commitment to some general idea or program, or the attempt to fulfil some ideal.[5] Discipleship means a quite concrete call to a particular person to follow Jesus in a particular way. Thus Levi was called to leave his tax-collecting and literally go with Jesus (Mark 2:14), but the Gerasene demoniac, whom Jesus healed, begged to be allowed to go with Jesus, but he was refused permission and was sent back to his home and friends to tell how much the Lord had done for him. So for each individual, the call to discipleship is a call to a particular concrete form of following Christ.

It needs to be emphasised that there are not two forms of the Christian life, an ordinary life of just being a Christian, and an extraordinary life of discipleship. All Christians are called to be disciples. Those who have not heard the call to discipleship cannot have clearly heard the call to be Christians either. How could one be a Christian without actually following Christ? It is only in taking the first steps of discipleship that the about-turn of conversion becomes a reality. Levi had to actually get up from his customs desk and follow Jesus. We all must do likewise.

Important as conversion and discipleship are, they have some limitations. They do not, for example, deal with our past wrong-doing. Even when we have made the about-turn of conversion and accepted the call to follow Jesus we may be tormented by a bad conscience over past evil and our inability still to lead a sinless life. So in addition to these things, we need the assurance of justification by grace through faith.

Justification

Alister McGrath makes the point that it was an accident of history that the concept of justification became the dominant soteriological metaphor in Western Christianity. He also suggests that we differentiate between the concept of justification and the doctrine of justification. The concept, he says, is one of many in the Bible that are employed to describe God's saving action. Another might have served equally well. However, the Western church has chosen this concept around which to develop its doctrine of salvation. In doing this, the church has given the concept an emphasis and importance beyond what it has in the New Testament.[6]

This may be a helpful observation for those who find the language and imagery of justification off-putting. There is nothing sacrosanct about it, though some Lutherans would disagree. Other

imagery and language may be used so long as the essential points made by the doctrine are preserved. However, since there is a long history of discussion of the doctrine of salvation in these terms, it is certainly easier to continue using them.

The bare essentials of the doctrine are that we are justified / put right with God / reconciled to God by God's grace alone received through faith. Sometimes it is referred to as justification by faith. It is dangerous for it to be shortened in this way because the emphasis then falls on what we do and it becomes human centred. If it is abbreviated at all, it should be referred to as justification by grace, which restores its God-centredness. But it is not a lot of extra effort to refer to the doctrine accurately as justification by grace through faith.

The biblical background

The language of justification is not particularly common in Scripture. It is found principally in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans. In the former, Paul is arguing with those Jews in Galatia who want to insist that Gentiles who wish to become Christians must first be circumcised according to the Jewish law and then observe the whole law as religious Jews do. Paul objects that though he and they are Jews by birth and keep the law, still they know that they are not reckoned as righteous (that is justified) by doing that but through faith in Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:15-21).

In Romans, Paul makes the same point, that is that though the law is valuable and not to be overthrown, nevertheless people are not justified by keeping it, for indeed no one does keep it entirely. All are sinners, both Jews and Gentiles. Therefore both are to depend for their justification on the grace of God as a gift (Romans 3:21-26). Paul establishes his point by reference to Abraham who lived before the law had been given but who was counted righteous because he believed God's promise (Romans 4).

The author of the letter to the Ephesians used the terminology of salvation rather than that of justification, but he states the essence of the doctrine concisely by saying 'by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God' (Ephesians 2:8).

The doctrine also draws on the principle of grace which runs right through the Bible. For example in Deuteronomy it is emphasised that God's choice of Israel was not based on any special quality in the nation which deserved God's favour. It was simply a matter of God's pure kindness and love (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

This same principle runs right through the teaching of Jesus. The prodigal son has nothing to offer his father. Indeed he is not allowed even to offer his apologies. He is welcomed home and

treated lavishly because of the father's love alone (Luke 15:11-32). In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke:18:9-14), it is the tax collector, who has simply confessed his sins and thrown himself on the mercy of God, who goes home justified. The Pharisee who offers to God his meticulous keeping of the law is not put right with God.

Fundamentally, the biblical principle of grace is that acceptance with God cannot be earned or bought. It is offered freely as a gift by the kindness of God and it can only be received, as any great gift is, with joy and gratitude.

Justification is a law court metaphor. It means to be acquitted of all charges, to be totally forgiven. 'By grace' means that this acquittal and forgiveness are due solely to God's kindness and mercy and are not earned or merited by us in any way. 'Through faith' is how we appropriate God's gift. It is not something we offer to God in exchange. Faith is trust in God's mercy alone, a firm and sure acceptance of God's word and judgment of acquittal.

What justification by grace opposes.

The meaning of a doctrine is often clarified by looking at what it opposes and seeks to rule out, so let us consider what justification by grace opposes.

1. In the gospels and in the teaching of Jesus, grace opposes every notion that we can earn merit with God and put God in the position where God owes us something. So it opposes also all vaunting of oneself and one's virtues and all despising of others for their alleged lack of virtue. It opposes also the despair that assumes that one's evil deeds have placed one forever beyond the love and acceptance of God.
2. In Paul's letters, it opposes justification by fulfilment of the Jewish law. People are not accepted by God because they are circumcised, observe all the food laws or even because they keep all of the ten commandments. In fact, people never do keep all the commandments perfectly. We are never as virtuous as we imagine. So to rely on our keeping of the law to gain acceptance with God is to rely on a false security.
3. We are not in the position of the Jewish Christians of Galatia and reliance on our keeping of Old Testament law is not likely to be a problem for us. In our case, the doctrine opposes our dependence on our good deeds, our good characters, our works of charity , our achievements, our status in society, our possessions, or whatever else we may hold up in our own favour.

Dependence on such things puts in jeopardy our relationship with God. It betrays a desire to have power with God and to put

God under obligation to us. It also has a bearing on our self-understanding. It can lead either to an unhealthy pride in our own virtue, a boastful attitude, or on the other hand despair over our inability to meet the standards of God.

The way of self-justification bedevils all human relationships. It leads to a sense of superiority over those who are imagined to be less virtuous, the patronising of those with less status and the despising of those with lesser achievements. It is an ingredient in every form of racism. So it is not just a theological matter; it has very practical implications.

The applications of the doctrine

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith has had various applications both in Scripture and in the history of Christianity.

1. In Galatians, Paul uses the doctrine to break down distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and to show that Gentiles do not need to become honorary Jews first in order to become Christians. What this means more broadly is that there are no preconditions for becoming Christians. It is not necessary to dress in a particular way, speak a certain language or appreciate a particular kind of music. It is not even necessary for the pagan chief to dispose of all his wives. Response to the gospel will bring its own changes but the gospel does not set preconditions.
2. In Romans Paul uses the doctrine to condemn divisions between Christians, particularly those that arise out of various scruples that people have (Romans 14). Christians are to accept one another as Christ has accepted them (Romans 15:7); that is with grace and tolerance and without waiting for them to come to agreement with us. Paul also uses the doctrine here to assure the Romans that they have peace with God and that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).
3. For Luther, the application of the doctrine was twofold. In the first place, it unmasked false practices in the church. If justification is by grace through faith, indulgences had no validity whatsoever. Secondly, the doctrine dealt with the tormented conscience experienced by Luther and many others in his time. Luther was deeply concerned about his inability to live a righteous life and to gain an acceptance with God thereby. It was an enormous relief to him to discover that no one can be put right with God by his or her own works but only by God's judgment of acquittal pronounced over us because of Christ. It was this discovery which brought peace to his troubled conscience.

4. Today, our concerns are different from those of Luther. We are not so much concerned with the troubled introspective conscience. Our longing is to be accepted and to feel OK. We are tormented by these issues from childhood. We try to deal with them in various ways - by wearing the right clothes, having the right hair-do, going to the right school, living in the right suburb, driving the right make of car, etc. But we are always being outdone by somebody else. Life is a minefield of insecurities. We can only escape when we realise that we can be OK only because God declares us to be OK and we have nothing to do but accept the fact that we are accepted.[7]

Strengths and weaknesses

The doctrine has many strengths. It rightly places the emphasis on our relationship with God as the central element in salvation and highlights the loving initiative of God in making and keeping that relationship right. It gives peace to those who, like Luther, are tormented by troubled consciences and to those who feel worthless and struggle for acceptance.

Yet at the same time it condemns all pride. Practically speaking, it enables us to serve our neighbours for their sakes and not for ours, for we do not gain 'stars in our crown' by our good scout deeds. As Christiaan Beker puts it, 'Faith transfers me to a domain where I am freed from self-concern and thus free for the neighbour'.[8]

The doctrine also has some weaknesses, only one of which needs to be highlighted here. It has a tendency to promote 'cheap grace'. Cheap grace, as Bonhoeffer defined it, is forgiveness without repentance, justification without reconciliation, grace without discipleship.[1] It arises from the supposition that God treats sin very lightly, and even condones it, and that forgiveness is a matter of course. Such a view is expressed in the saying, 'The world is admirably arranged, for I like to sin and God likes to forgive'.

To some extent, this is a problem with the doctrine but it is more especially the result of human misunderstanding. Knowing the doctrine of justification is mistaken for participating in the reality. We are not justified by understanding the doctrine of justification through intellect; we are justified by grace through faith. For those who know the reality and not just the doctrine, cheap grace is not an option.

Righteous yet also a sinner

We have spoken of conversion, regeneration, discipleship and justification, yet in spite of all the truth and reality of these concepts, it has to be acknowledged that when we look at the lives of

Christians, even the saints, we still see many weaknesses and blemishes. It is the same when we look at ourselves. For all our conversion experiences, a great deal of prejudice, blindness, self-delusion, dishonesty and unloving attitudes remain.

It is clear from his *Lectures on Romans* that Luther once expected that a total eradication of sin would accompany justification. He tells us, 'I fought with myself; because I did not know that though forgiveness is indeed real, sin is not taken away except in hope'.[10] It was this discovery which led Luther to propose his famous assessment of the Christian: *simul iustus et peccator*, righteous but at the same time a sinner. This is a key concept in Luther.

Luther believed that the recognition of this reality is absolutely essential, because apart from it one is led in either of two dangerous directions. On the one hand, one might be led to pride and a feeling of superiority. What is more, if the possibility of sinning is no longer recognised, one may be led into worse sin, just as sick people who assume they are better before they really are may have a serious relapse.

On the other hand, failure to recognise that even the born again are both righteous and sinners can lead to a relapse into doubt and despair, on the assumption that because one has not been made perfect, justification must be illusory.

This understanding of the state of the Christian has continued to hold a firm place in Protestant theology. It is clearly found in Calvin's *Institutes*. The title of section 3.3.10 is 'Believers are still sinners' and in the next section he says, 'But sin ceases only to reign, it does not also cease to dwell in them'.

Wesley certainly would not have liked Luther's phrase if he had come across it, since he would probably have taken it to imply that there is no moral change in the converted. In fact, in Sermon 1, entitled *Salvation by Faith*, Wesley claimed that 'he that is, by faith born of God, sinneth not, neither by any habitual sin, nor by any wilful sin, nor by any sinful desires'.[11] However, he modified his views, and in later sermons, particularly that entitled *On Sin in Believers*, he clearly taught that inward sin remains even in the regenerate, though it does not reign.

In recent times, the concept occupied a key place in the social ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr. It was clearly sustained by Karl Barth, and Hans Kung, in response to Barth's criticism of Catholic doctrine, claims that one can even speak of a Catholic *simul* concept.[12]

Sanctification

The question arises, if the Christian is always both righteous and a sinner, where does sanctification come in? Is there no growth in

goodness? Should we not expect the Christian to become more righteous in himself or herself, and less a sinner? There has never been total agreement in Protestant thought on this issue.

Luther's understanding

In the case of Luther, it is difficult to speak of sanctification at all, though he always insisted that faith, and the justification which faith receives, can and must issue in good works. However, Luther saw the self as basically identified in this life with the flesh, which is not simply the physical part of us, but essentially the old Adam. The flesh cannot be sanctified; it can only be mortified (that is put to death) and that is done, not by some higher element of ourselves which grows stronger and stronger, but by Christ who is present through faith.

The Christian life is the life Christ lives in us. One cannot speak of a personal progressive growth in holiness and goodness. The Christian always remains totally righteous because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, but totally a sinner in himself or herself.

Luther's view relies on his understanding of Romans 7:13-25, which is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret, and on Galatians 2:17-21. There is virtue in this understanding of the Christian life. It does justice to the experience of inner conflict which most people have, as well as to the conviction of the believer that what is good in him or her is of grace alone. It is a liberating model of the Christian life, teaching us to look only to God and to rely entirely upon grace. Its weakness is that by insisting that believers are totally righteous and totally sinners, it leaves them with an ambiguous self-understanding. There is also a serious question whether Scripture really supports Luther's model.

Wesley's view

Wesley, on the other hand, saw sanctification as an on-going process in the life of the Christian. For him, conversion and justification were just the beginning of the Christian life. and those who had experienced them were to press on to holiness. He spoke of justification as being just the door of religion, while holiness was religion itself. He regarded sanctification as something which God works in us by the Spirit, but also as something which each person is to strive for.

Wesley regarded sanctification as progressive, reflecting those New Testament passages in which the life of the Christian is seen in terms of growth, for example Ephesians 4:11-16. The metaphor of organic growth is prominent in his writing. The newly converted are only babes in Christ and they must grow into mature persons. The idea of renewal is also prominent. The believer is one who is

being renewed into the lost image of God, but the renewal is not accomplished all at once.

Wesley's view honours God by allowing to God the power to transform a person's nature and to do more about sin than forgive it. It is optimistic in that sense. The hymns of the Wesleys are filled with the joyful confidence in the new possibilities grace opens up to us. Unfortunately, it is also capable of being understood in a very joyless and legalistic manner, when the emphasis falls on our own striving rather than God's grace, and when the Christian life is understood as the effort to become what we are not.

Sanctification as being who you are according to promise

There is another view in Scripture which also finds expression in the work of a number of theologians and which appears to be more truly characteristic of the New Testament. It is most clearly and consistently expressed in the letters of St Paul. Many passages might be cited, but perhaps the classic expression of it is in Romans 6:1-11.

According to this passage, Christians have been baptised into the death of Christ. They are therefore dead to sin. Their old life is past. The new life they live is one of hope and promise, namely that we shall be united with Christ in a resurrection like his and shall live with him as joint-heirs, sons and daughters of God. Promise and hope are future, but they also profoundly alter the nature and structure of life in the present, because they give us an entirely new understanding of ourselves, of who we are and how we are to live.

We can illustrate this from the musical *My Fair Lady*. According to the story, Professor Higgins takes hold of Liza, the Cockney flower girl, in a London street, and vows so to transform her that he can pass her off as a duchess in high society. From the moment that Liza takes him up on that promise, she is in a new world. Sometimes it is tough going, but Liza clings to the promise and the hope that goes with it, and they are by no means empty.

So Christ is our Professor Higgins who has promised to transform us so as to make us sons and daughters in the household of God. If we accept that promise and live in that hope, we are already different people. What is more, the fulfilment of the promise begins already in the present. The Holy Spirit is given as a first-fruit and down-payment, and she imparts gifts which are openly manifested, sometimes in spectacular ways such as speaking in tongues, but also, and more importantly, in faith, love and service.

According to this view, justification and sanctification belong together as part of the new reality that is given to us in the promise.

Astounded at the behaviour of the Corinthians, Paul says to them, 'that is how you lived before you received the gospel, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' (1 Corinthians 6:11). They had forgotten that. They were living as though the gospel were not true and as though Christ had made no difference.

What was lacking was not the new reality, but their faith in it and hence their will to let the change be evident. It was as if the lame man who heard Christ's command to arise and walk, simply continued to lie there, unwilling to believe that Christ's word had made any difference to his situation.

According to this view, the believer's life is not a progress towards sanctification, but a life in sanctification. The Christian is not called to work for something, as though it does not exist and has to be created by his or her effort, but to exhibit a new reality which is already present. That is why this is truly a gospel (good news) view of the Christian life. It does not call upon us to make ourselves what we are not, but to take seriously what God has done and to be what God has made us according to God's promise.

This view does not deny that sin remains in Christians, but it remains as an unnatural contradiction of their new being. Though they remain righteous and sinners at the same time, they may not regard themselves equally from either point of view. Bonhoeffer stated the situation as follows:

> *This is why Christians are no longer to be called sinners, in the sense of [people] who are still living under the dominion of sin (the only apparent exception is in 1 Timothy 1:15, but that is a personal confession). On the contrary they were once sinners, ungodly, enemies (Romans 5:8, 19: Galatians 2:15, 17) but now through Christ they are holy. As saints they are reminded and exhorted to be what they are. But this is not an impossible ideal. it is not sinners who are required to become holy or that would mean a return to justification by works and would be blasphemy against Christ. No, it is saints who are required to be holy, saints who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit.*

Responsible freedom

The life-style which is in keeping with the view of the Christian life we have just described may be characterised as one of responsible freedom. Believers know that they have been made free in Christ. Their life is no longer one which is bound by any law system, or can be described in terms of laws (Galatians 5:1). What they are called upon to do is not to obey a set of laws, but to be the sons and daughters God has made them in Christ.

On that basis, they are prepared to act in the freedom of their new being without requiring support or justification from some set of authorities or laws. Yet, being aware that this new reality is always in danger of contradiction by the sin which remains in them, they do not act arrogantly or high-handedly. They keep before them the exhortation to live by the gospel and to be what they are, and they allow this to take quite concrete form in the commandments, the apostolic instruction, etc.

There are a number of aids to the Christian life which function not to prescribe what action must be taken, but as means God has given to ensure that free action remains responsible. Thus, to take a simple example, the rule about truth-telling is regarded very seriously, and yet there may be a situation in which responsible love requires the rule to be broken, and the Christian acts with that freedom.

Amongst the principal aids to responsible freedom are the Ten Commandments, the teaching of the prophets and the apostolic instruction such as we find in Romans 12:9-21 and Colossians 3:13-4:5. Of supreme importance in this respect are the example and teaching of Jesus.

At first sight, it might appear to be a matter of regret that so little of the teaching of Jesus has been preserved and that there are so many areas of life not dealt with. In fact, there is some advantage in this, since it prevents us from becoming dependent on a series of instructions which we turn into a fixed and eternal law. In many instances, we have to act upon our own free decision, since we have no word from Jesus bearing directly on the issues. Yet the teaching of Jesus is sufficient to enable us to check that our free action is also responsible Christian action.[13]

Another valuable asset is the collective wisdom of the church. It is in this community that insights are brought to bear on new moral issues and with the leading of the Holy Spirit, guidance and correction for individual Christians emerges. Because of our own blind spots and natural biases, we cannot, if we wish to be truly responsible, trust merely to our own intuitions. We need to listen to others with a similar commitment to discipleship. In this regard, the academic discussion of Christian ethics is important, since it ensures that within the church, in the widest possible context, ethical issues are thoroughly studied in the light of the Scriptures, the tradition and whatever other resources are available.

Spiritual disciplines

Finally, amongst the resources for ensuring responsible freedom, mention must be made of the spiritual disciplines. It is supremely through prayer and worship that we are reminded of who we are

and on what basis we are to live. It is here that the gospel is heard in a living way, the promise of God in Christ is renewed and we are exhorted to believe the gospel and live by it. It is in these activities also that we confess our sin and find forgiveness, open ourselves again and again to the Holy Spirit and experience the fulfilment of the promise that he will guide us into all truth.

Christian perfection

Talk of Christian perfection is widely regarded as rather dangerous - a subject for fanatics. The word perfect does occur in the New Testament (Matthew 5:48; Philippians 3:12,15; Colossians 1:28, *Authorised Version*) and the Methodist tradition has preserved an interest in the subject because of the teaching of Wesley, though in recent times very little is heard on the subject even in Methodist circles.

Wesley taught that Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, as he sometimes called it, is a gift of God which is received in an instant through faith. Though it is a gift, it can be sought; one does not have to wait for it in utter passivity.

The perfection of which Wesley spoke was only of a relative kind, and he continually warned his preachers against setting it too high, or claiming too much for it. He did not envisage the possibility of an angelic perfection, or the perfection of Adam before the Fall. He taught that any perfection we attain here will always permit of further growth in grace and advance in the knowledge and love of God.

What Wesley had in mind was a kind of supernatural love capable of expelling all conscious sin and enabling a person to think and act with no other conscious motive than that of love. Even such a perfection would allow for a good deal of sin, since people's worst sins are often those of which they are least conscious. Nevertheless, if a person always acted out of love alone, that would be a great moral advance.

It is very questionable, though, whether there is such a state which a person may reach at a particular instant and remain in thereafter. Wesley himself became more and more uncertain on this point and by 1770 had come to question whether it may not be misleading to speak of a sanctified state. If the concept of a state of perfection is abandoned, what would remain would be simply a profound confidence in the grace of God, an optimism of grace, which believes that in any particular moment, decision or action, there is no limit to the extent to which one may be filled and governed by the love of God, and no limit to what that can make possible.

This is how we are to understand those sayings of Jesus that call for a quite extraordinary righteousness - not in terms of a new

super-stringent law, but in terms of a new extraordinary possibility. This is in keeping with the dominant view of the Christian life in the New Testament as outlined above. The Christian life is not only one of responsible freedom; it is also one of grace, hope, optimism and joy.

Notes

[1] V. Eller: *Outward Bound*, Eerdmans, 1980.

[2] For Barth's illuminating discussion of conversion, see his *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, T. & T. Clark, 1958, pp. 553ff.

[3] J. Cowburn: *Shadows and the Dark*, S.C.M. Press, 1979, p. 98.

[4] I am aware, of course, that Calvin uses the term regeneration differently. He uses it for what Wesley calls sanctification. I prefer to follow Wesley and leave the term regeneration for that work of God in our souls which makes it possible for us to turn to God in repentance and receive forgiveness.

[5] K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p. 536.

[6] A. McGrath: *Iustitia Dei*, Vol.1, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 2.

[7] See Paul Tillich's sermon, 'You Are Accepted', in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, S.C.M. Press, 1949.

[8] J. C. Beker: *Paul the Apostle*, T. & T. Clark, 1989, p. 247.

[9] Readers are referred to the superb treatment of this subject in D. Bonhoeffer: *The Cost of Discipleship*, S.C.M. Press, 1959. This is one of the great spiritual classics of the twentieth century.

[10] M. Luther: *Lectures on Romans*, S.C.M. Press, 1961, p. 128.

[11] John Wesley: *Forty-Four Sermons*, Epworth Press, 1946, p. 5.

[12] H. Kung: *Justification*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1964, pp. 236f.

[13] Karl Barth has identified six 'prominent lines' in the ethical teaching of Jesus. To these I would add a seventh which I would prefix to those identified by Barth. These seven prominent lines have an important role both in helping us to keep free action responsible and in helping us to see the possibilities of Christian discipleship. The seven are as follows: (1) The followers of Jesus are called to a life of alertness. (2) Followers of Jesus are called to be free from attachment to things (wealth and possessions). (3) Followers are called to be free from concern about earthly status. (4) Followers of Jesus are to be free from the fear of force and therefore are not to use it themselves. (5) Followers are not to be bound in personal attachments. (6) Followers are to renounce outward show of piety and moral superiority. (7) Followers are called to bear the cross. For Barth's exposition of these lines, see *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, pp. 547ff.

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The life of the world to come

The kingdom of God

The kingdom of God was a central theme in the teaching of Jesus. It was the subject of many of his parables, many of which began with the phrase, the kingdom of God is like.

Sometimes the kingdom of God was a conclusion to be drawn from his miracles (Luke 11:20 - If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you). He taught that the kingdom of God was to be sought after (Matthew 6:33) and also that it was a prize given to some (Matthew 5:3), that it was at hand (Matthew 10:7), that it comes (Luke 17:20), and he taught his disciples to pray for its coming, and to some he said, Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you (Luke 17:21).

The exact phrase, the kingdom of God, does not appear in the Old Testament, but the idea that God is sovereign is found all through it, and the language of kingship (dominion, rule, reign) is common. We have to bear in mind that Jesus spoke against this background, and that he spoke a Semitic language, Aramaic, with basic similarities to Hebrew. In that linguistic setting, the kingdom of God means the reign of God, the sovereignty of God or the kingship of God. The kingdom of God has to do with the nature of Godself.

In English, a kingdom is a territory over which a monarch rules, and the people who inhabit that territory. The people may deny the sovereignty of a particular king, but they remain a kingdom. In that case, however, the claimant to the throne does not remain a king; he is only a claimant, a pretender. But the kingdom of God (that is God's kingship) remains, whether for the time being people acknowledge God as sovereign or not.

In the Old Testament, we find already an expectation of the day of the Lord (Joel 2:11, 31). It was expected to be a day of vindication for the righteous and of defeat for the enemies of God. It was thought of as a day of judgment and a day when God's kingship would be made evident to all. Already in the Old Testament, there is a distinction between the eternal fact of God's kingship, and a future demonstration of it in the world with power.

One question which has been the centre of debate is how Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God relates to this Old Testament background.

Eschatology

Here we need to introduce the term eschatology. It is derived from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning last or final. Eschatology is the study, theory or doctrine of the last things. For the Old Testament writers, the day of the Lord was an eschatological event, because it was seen as belonging to the end-time.

The question then arises, was Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God eschatological? For a long time, Christians would have answered confidently that it was not. The kingdom of God was regarded as a spiritual matter, a relationship between God and the individual who had faith in God, or perhaps as a spiritual state into which the individual might enter by taking seriously the teaching of Jesus.

A more social understanding of the kingdom emerged from the Social Gospel Movement in the United States of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Walter Rauschenbusch, the most notable figure in the movement, saw the kingdom of God as a new social order in which love reigns in human affairs, coercion of every kind is superseded, and the purposes of God for human society are realised.

Rauschenbusch had a great confidence that the kingdom would emerge out of the present order, both through the redemption of individuals and through the education of people according to the principles which Jesus left us.

It was always recognised that there were eschatological elements in Jesus' teaching, according to the gospels, for example prophecies of future cataclysmic events, but only the sects took these very seriously. Mainline Christianity was inclined to dismiss them as unessential fringe elements of Jesus' teaching, perhaps not even genuine.

Albert Schweitzer completely upset these established notions. He insisted that eschatology was at the very centre of Jesus' teachings, not just on the periphery, and that unless this was

recognised Jesus could not be understood at all. A. T. Hanson sums up Schweitzer's view as follows:

> *Jesus came in order to proclaim the approaching eschatological climax. He originally believed that by sending out the Twelve he would bring the crisis to its consummation. When this did not happen, Jesus decided that he must deliberately take upon himself the apocalyptic woes and offer himself as the ransom which would enable God to grant the New Age. He went up to Jerusalem, therefore, with one aim only, to die in order that history might end and God's great act of consummation might take place after his death.*[1]

According to this view, the kingdom of God is entirely future, belonging to the end-time. Schweitzer's position became known as 'consistent eschatology', since it interpreted Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God consistently in eschatological terms.

Though Schweitzer's book had a tremendous impact on the subject, his conclusion was not widely accepted. In the 1930s, the English scholar, C. H. Dodd, put forward a view almost diametrically opposed to that of Schweitzer. Dodd pointed to aspects of the teaching of Jesus and elements in the apostolic preaching which suggested that, with the coming of Jesus, a new age was inaugurated in which Old Testament expectations were fulfilled, and the kingdom was already present and accessible. The kingdom had come. Dodd argued, in fact, that some of the prophecies attributed to Jesus concerning cataclysmic events yet to come were not a genuine part of this teaching. Dodd's view is known as realised eschatology, for, according to it, the eschatological prophecies had already been realised.

Dodd's view also was not thoroughly convincing. There are many sayings of Jesus in which the kingdom is obviously regarded as future. In evidence it is sufficient to recall the prayer Jesus taught: 'Your kingdom come'. What is more, outside the gospels, the New Testament does express a keen expectation of something quite crucial which, even after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after Pentecost, was yet to come.

On the other hand, there clearly are passages which suggest that in some radically new way the kingdom has come in Jesus' own person and ministry. Many New Testament scholars therefore take a view which might be called inaugurated eschatology. According to this view, the new age has been inaugurated yet the final consummation still lies ahead.

T. W. Manson, for example, argued in 1931 that the kingdom of God is an eternal reality, just as the Fatherhood of God is. It is presently manifested in the world whenever God's claim to

sovereignty is recognised and God's rule obeyed, but it has a future consummation when God's rule will be fully acknowledged and his will done on earth as it is in heaven.

R. H. Fuller is another example of the school of inaugurated eschatology. He has argued for understanding the kingdom both as having come, in one sense, and yet as having a future aspect to it, but he links the presentness of the kingdom much more decisively with the mission of Jesus than Manson did. With Jesus, what was looked for and hoped for in the Old Testament has begun but has not yet been fully realised. There is something more that we can look and hope for.[2] This is associated with the *parousia* of Christ, sometimes referred to as Christ's return or second coming.

What is this more? It is an end, a summing-up, a fulfilment of the purposes of God. On the basis of a careful examination of the teaching of Jesus, Manson made five points about this looked-for consummation:

1. It does not come as a peaceful reformation of the existing order as the Social Gospel Movement imagined it would. It does not emerge as the end-point in an evolutionary process. It comes rather as a drastic breaking-in-upon the existing order, taking everyone by surprise.
2. One aspect of the event is a great judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) in which all that is good is affirmed and all that is evil is condemned. The test of good is what attitude people have taken towards Jesus and what he represents. Those who have not had the opportunity to take up any attitude to Jesus will be judged by their response to whatever manifestation of God was available to them in their time and place (Matthew 12:41f, Luke 11:31f).
3. The final consummation marks the end of the present era, and all that is evil is eliminated. It is victory day for God the king. However, although it is represented as such in other parts of the New Testament, Jesus does not speak of it as a great battle; rather he presents it as a great moral victory.
4. A new era is inaugurated in which God is truly sovereign in a universe cleansed of all evil, and life is lived in its truest and fullest sense (Luke 13:28-29; Matthew 22:1-14). Jesus was reticent to speak about conditions of life in the kingdom. Several times he used the analogy of a wedding feast to depict it, but life in the kingdom is not simply one of passive enjoyment. It is also a state of enlarged opportunities, as the parable of the talents suggests. But in the end all that can be said about it is that it is beyond our experience, and therefore beyond our imagination (1 Corinthians 2:9).

5. No one can predict the time of its coming. Even the Son does not know it, but only the Father (Mark 13:32).[3]

To some, all of this may sound highly mythological, and in a sense it is, for mythology is the only way we can express convictions about things we cannot speak of literally. It is certainly not mythical in the sense of being a fairy story which signifies nothing. It is not unimportant. The significance of eschatology is well expressed by American theologian, Gordon Kaufman:

> *For the Christian, ... Jesus Christ is the decisive event revealing the character of ultimate reality: it is the loving and faithful God - Creator of the world and Purposer of history - with whom [people] have finally to do. Christian eschatology is the attempt (on the basis of the revelatory event) to state explicitly what those purposes for history are and to conceptualise the future as their realisation. Unless such specification of the future is in some degree possible, it is empty euphemism to speak of God as, for example, a loving Father; and the theological understanding of self, world and ultimate reality is threatened. Eschatological doctrine, far from being superfluous and dispensable speculation, deals with the very foundations of Christian faith.*[4]

Together with past events, such as the death and resurrection of Jesus, and present experiences, eschatology sets the scene in which we have to live and work as Christians. It would be impossible for us to have a whole and consistent attitude to life in the world without some convictions about the future.

To use an analogy first given currency by Oscar Cullmann, Christians see themselves as living between D-Day (Invasion Day in Europe in 1944, the success of which set the seal on Hitler's defeat) and V-Day (when the final surrender took place).[5] We know that the decisive victory has been won, and we look to the time when that is finally clear to all. So we live and work in hope, and not in apathy or despair. We know that many battles have still to be fought, and many will be bloodied in the fight. We do not expect the way to be any easier until the end and the victory banner waves, but we are not afraid because we know who it is who has the victory, and we know that none of our toil or suffering is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Apocalyptic speculation

There are, however, some people of adventist outlook, whether in a sect or in the church, who are not satisfied with such general conclusions as Manson's. They still believe that the time of the *parousia* of Christ can be calculated and the events surrounding it depicted in brilliant and graphic detail by means of deductions

from enigmatic passages of Scripture. They do not heed Jesus' warning that no one knows the time, not even the Son, nor the fact that people have been attempting to predict the time for centuries with no success.

Some groups who major on this kind of speculation are positively dangerous. One such group is the pretribulation premillenialists. They expect Christ to return before 'the great tribulation' prior to the millennium (Revelation 20:1-6). When he does he will 'rapture' the true believers out of the world (1 Thessalonians 4:17) so that they will not have to endure the terrors of the tribulation.

Part of their doctrine is that the world can only get worse to the point where Christ intervenes in judgment. Any attempt to improve social conditions is not only doomed to ultimate failure but is contrary to the will and plan of God. All it would do is perhaps to delay the day of judgment of the wicked and the day of salvation for the righteous.

Peacemaking is also totally rejected by adherents of this doctrine. Indeed there are some who believe it is the business of Christians to hasten the day by fomenting trouble. They seek to heighten tension between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Some U.S. congregations are even reported to have collected large sums of money and sent it to Israel to buy arms.

This kind of speculation can very easily supplant all genuine concern about the gospel and all concern for actually following Christ. The world in all its need is abandoned for a life of apocalyptic excitement. Christians must be warned against this danger. Eschatology is meant to be the background against which we live as disciples, not the foreground which leaves no room for discipleship now.

Death and the individual

When we think as Christians about the future, we are bound to think not only about the fate of the world as a whole, but also about what awaits us as individuals. Is death the end of our individual existence, or is it but the gateway to a new form of existence?

In the New Testament age, the hope for the world and the hope for the individual were closely tied together, for it was thought that the return of the Lord would occur in the lifetime of most of the first believers. That this was the expectation can be gauged from a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 15 as well as the letters to the Thessalonians. The Lord did not return as quickly as was expected. Many generations of believers have lived and died and this has necessitated the rethinking of eschatology, and a separation

of our hopes for the individual from our hopes concerning history as a whole, though at times the two still get confused.

Attitudes to death

Before we deal with the question of life after death, we should stop for a moment to reflect on death itself and human attitudes to it. If we go back a few centuries in time, most people seem to have had a strong hope of personal survival. The universe seemed cosily small, and the idea of heaven above the bright blue sky was a concept that did not strain people's credulity too much. At the same time, life-expectancy was shorter and life was very much more uncertain than it now is. Death was a much more obvious element in human experience and people were more open in speaking about it.

In recent times, various factors have conspired to make death virtually an unmentionable subject. At the same time, there has been a loss of conviction about any continuing human existence beyond death. Very recently all this has begun to change a little. Pastors and other professional people have begun to pay much more attention to ministry to the dying. In this respect, the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross[6] has gained attention throughout the world. Also the revival of people who have apparently died, made possible by advances in medical technology, has enabled us to learn something about the process of dying. It appears that death is not, or need not be, as frightening or as obscene as our age has taken it to be.

Christian thinking about death has been rather ambivalent. On the one hand, death has been regarded either as punishment for sin, or a great enemy of God and God's people, which still remains to be defeated. On the other hand, there are hints that physical death was always part of God's plan for human beings (Genesis 3:22), and indeed were that not so, there would not be standing room upon the planet now for all the people who have been born.

In contrast to the negative view of death, Paul does not hesitate to say that his desire is to depart (die) and be with Christ (Philippians 1:23), and Christian martyrs in every age have scorned the threat of death in their faithfulness to Christ. St Francis of Assisi even spoke of death as kind and gentle, one of God's creatures who could fittingly be called upon to praise his Maker.[7]

What makes death so fearful is our sin (1 Corinthians 15:56) and our lack of trust in God. As people redeemed by Christ, we are to approach death knowing that its sting has been drawn because of the redemption which is ours through Christ Jesus.

At the same time, death is a parting from those we love, and an end to all our plans and hopes in this world, and therefore it inevitably brings sadness and regrets. Also it is an unknown and

therefore, like all unknowns, fills us with apprehension. And of course we naturally shrink from the sickness and pain which so often precede death.

Balancing all these considerations, Christians might more fittingly regard death as part of the shadow-side of creation, to use Barth's phrase, rather than an evil. If we can view death in this way, there is no reason why we should treat it simply as a grim inevitability, best kept as far from our thoughts as possible until the hour strikes. It is possible for some people, in some circumstances at least, to work through their approaching death, so that it becomes the fitting climax of life.

Developments in pastoral theory and practice which are making this kind of constructive approach to death possible are to be welcomed by all Christian people.

Life after death?

Our age has no firm conviction about life beyond death. An increasingly physiological understanding of mental processes, combined with an increasingly materialistic view of the universe, has produced a mood of extreme scepticism. Belief in God has been in decline in the Western world for some time also, and where lively belief in God has disappeared, belief in life beyond death rarely survives.

Talk about the afterlife is a pretense we keep up at times of bereavement and funerals but at other times the thought of it is scarcely entertained.

Even some theologians have abandoned any belief in life beyond death. Gordon Kaufman, from whom we quoted earlier, expresses such a scepticism, which is all the more remarkable in comparison with his firm hope concerning the fulfilment of God's purposes in history. He writes:

> *... individuals die in a matter of a few years! - and we have no reason to suppose their life continues beyond the grave. Human consciousness and self-consciousness, in the only way we know them, are intimately tied up with bodily existence; and with death the body falls into decay and dissolution. [People] of other ages and cultures, subscribing to different psychologies, could develop doctrines of the 'immortality of the soul' according to which man's true essence is divine and survives bodily death; to modern psychology and medicine, man appears as a psychosomatic unity whose spiritual life is inseparably bound to its physical base. The end of the body, therefore, is the end of the [person], except to the degree his [or her] ideas and attitudes and actions continue to affect the communities and cultures within which he [or she] lived and worked.*[8]

It is to be noted also that the subject is seldom dealt with any longer in Christian preaching, except at funerals. Reserved for such occasions only, reference to the hope for a life beyond the grave has about it an air of unreality and make-believe.

Old Testament views on death

The Hebrew people, for most of the period covered by the Old Testament, held no hope for real life beyond the grave. They believed their dead departed to Sheol, a place of nothingness, the no-world. When King Hezekiah was sick and feared he was going to die, he lamented, 'I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord in the land of the living' (Isaiah 38:10-11). When he recovered, he rejoiced and thanked God because life was so much better than the shadow world of Sheol (Isaiah 38:18f.).

Yet, on the whole, in the Hebrew Scriptures death, is not regarded as an evil, but simply as part of creatureliness. Only in certain circumstances is it regarded as evil or as punishment, namely when it is premature, or violent especially with the spilling of blood, or when there is no surviving heir. Even in the prophetic vision of the new age, it is not suggested that death will be abolished, but only that everyone shall live to grand old age (Isaiah 65:20).

There are some Old Testament passages that seem to speak of the hope of an after-life, but close examination shows most of them to have a different meaning. At best, there is a groping for the hope of something better. In the late Old Testament period, there first developed some hope for the bodily resurrection of a select few (Isaiah 26:19, which many scholars regard as a late insertion in the text). Then in the book of Daniel, written about 168-165 BCE, there is a single reference to a hope for a real life beyond death (Daniel 12:2): 'Many of those who sleep in the dust of earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt'.

In the Apocrypha, The Wisdom of Solomon, written less than 50 years BCE, reflecting the Greek influence at Alexandria, expresses a clear hope of immortality. Even this is a conditional immortality, for the souls of the righteous only.

The teaching of Jesus and the New Testament

By Jesus' time, many Jews, but not the Sadducees, believed in a future resurrection of the dead. There was still some difference of opinion whether the resurrection would be of a physical kind to a new life on a renewed earth, or whether it would be of a spiritual nature and in a different sphere.

It is quite clear that Jesus held a belief in the resurrection. Though Jesus generally tried to avoid entering into disputes amongst competing sects and parties, it is significant that in the dispute over this matter between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, Jesus took the side of the Pharisees (Matthew 22:23-33).

It is clear also from the way in which Jesus answered the Sadducees that he understood it to be a spiritual resurrection. (In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.) St Paul expressed basically the same understanding of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:35-44.

Resurrection rather than immortality

The New Testament does not speak of natural immortality of the human soul. Immortality is always that which we still have to put on (1 Corinthians 15:53) or at least it is a gift received either now or later. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is Greek rather than biblical. The distinctively biblical hope is for resurrection (Romans 6:5).

Accordingly, the Christian view expressed in the Creed is, 'I believe ... in the resurrection of the body'. In this context, however, body does not mean the physical body of flesh and bone and blood, for as Paul says, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Body means roughly what we mean by person. The resurrection of the person is what the New Testament speaks about.

It may be argued that there is really no difference between the concepts of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, particularly if it is held that God will raise up all people. To be sure, the effect is the same, but there are some important differences.

First, the resurrection of the body means that it is the total person, the result of all sorts of experiences, physical, mental and spiritual which is to be raised, an identifiable me with all my particular idiosyncrasies, not some isolated, antiseptic spiritual fraction of the person - the indestructible black box which survives the air crash.

Secondly, the concept of the resurrection of the body preserves and expresses the conviction that we remain totally dependent upon God in the world-to-come as much as in this present world. As creatures of God, our existence is always contingent, precarious and dependent. The soul is not naturally indestructible, and that means that the possibility of final extinction is not to be ruled out.

Judgment

The idea of judgment figures prominently in the teaching of Jesus. It is so deeply woven into his teaching that it cannot be extracted without doing violence to the whole pattern and fabric of his

teaching. Many people find the idea of judgment objectionable. If judgment means that some are totally pardoned while others suffer eternal punishment without any hope of redemption, then it surely does run counter even to the best human notions of love and justice, but it need not be understood in this way. The only alternative to judgment would be a world totally indifferent to good and evil, a non-moral world in which anything goes, and one may as well be an Adolf Hitler as a Mother Teresa.

The Bible in places expresses the view that some judgment takes place in this world, and that people reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7), but it is a very rough justice and does not fulfil all that is said in the New Testament about judgment.

Nevertheless, the idea of everlasting punishment in hell does not find a great deal of support in the New Testament. In fact, in the teaching of Jesus, it is only in the parable (if we may call it that) of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) that we read of eternal punishment in contrast to eternal life. In other instances, the punishment spoken of might very well end in reformation and redemption (for example Matthew 18:34-35). There are even some instances in which Jesus seems to indicate that there is a gradation of condemnation and punishment (for example Luke 12:47f.).

Jesus did speak of hell (*Gehenna*) (Mark 9:47f.). The word is derived from the place name, *Ge-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom, to the south of Jerusalem where human sacrifices were offered to Moloch (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). To stop such offerings, Josiah, as part of his reform, defiled it by turning it into a rubbish dump where the garbage from Jerusalem was dumped and burnt. It was a place of destruction, not torment. To be sure, the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched there, but it is not the same rubbish that is eaten or burnt forever. It does not follow from these words of Jesus that a wicked individual will suffer the worm and the fire forever. If the pictorial language about Gehenna suggests anything, it is the possibility of final lostness and extinction, not everlasting torture.

However, imagery of this kind cannot be pushed too far. All we can really say with confidence is that in the teaching of Jesus, hell is the alternative to being grasped by a power stronger than death and held in the presence of God. Certainly his references to hell were never meant to enable some to gloat over others, but only as a warning to all his hearers to turn from those attitudes and that style of life that may lead to exclusion from the presence of God.

Alternative scenarios for life after death

As mentioned earlier, not a few Christian theologians have abandoned any hope of personal survival, and, unless death comes

very near to them, most modern secular people seem to have little faith in any existence beyond death. A number of theologians have suggested that the way in which we survive is in the memory of God. To be remembered by another, as I remember my parents, is not in any sense to exist, and it is hard to see that to be remembered by God is really any different. Attempts by certain theologians to make it appear as something more seem to me to be pure equivocation.

Those who do affirm the hope of life beyond death differ from each other in a number of important respects. The following four positions, or variations of them, are the most common views.

1. All sleep until the day of resurrection

At death all people fall asleep and remain asleep until the final resurrection and judgment. For what happens after that we would need to consider the three options set out below. There is some support for this view in the New Testament, for example 1 Corinthians 15:20,1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, together with some passages in Revelation. However, this is certainly not the consistent view of the New Testament and probably arose out of an attempt to reconcile expectations concerning the individual with expectations concerning the return of the Lord and the destiny of the world as a whole.

At least by the time he wrote to the Philippians, Paul expected that if he departed he would be immediately with Christ (Philippians 1 :23). To the penitent criminal crucified beside him Jesus gave the promise, 'today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Though one must be wary of building too much on the details of parables, in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Lazarus is depicted as being already in Abraham 's bosom.

2. The just resurrected to life - the wicked perish

The just shall be raised to life, but the wicked simply perish. The Gehenna imagery suggests the possibility of the destruction of the wicked, while all the New Testament authors affirm that the just will inherit eternal life .The famous verse John 3:16 suggests that perishing is the alternative to everlasting life. Speaking of those who do not know God or obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says, 'These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might'. Revelation 20:12-15 also suggests the ultimate, though not immediate, extinction of the wicked.

However, there are also many passages, some of which have already been mentioned, which suggest that the judgment of the wicked leads to punishment, with at least the possibility of

redemption rather than destruction. Nevertheless, the possibility of individuals choosing in their obstinacy final lostness is not ruled out by Scripture.

3. Eternal blessedness and eternal punishment

All people will be raised, some to eternal punishment and some to an eternal life of blessedness. This has been the most commonly held view in the church for centuries. It is only in comparatively recent times that the notion of eternal torture without any possibility of reform or redemption has been seen to be utterly monstrous, and has been increasingly rejected as incompatible with the notion of a good and loving God. As we have seen, when support for this view is sought in Scripture, it is found to be very slim and certainly very far from unanimous.

Hans Kung believes that this understanding of the destiny of unbelievers and the wicked has had a most horrific outcome in the history of the last two millennia. He quotes with approval the words of Catholic theologians Gertrude and Thomas Sartory who state that Christianity is the most murderous religion there has ever been. They believe that this is largely due to the Christian doctrine of hell. 'If someone is convinced that God condemns a person to hell for all eternity for no other reason than because he is a heathen, a Jew or a heretic, he cannot for his own part fail to regard all heathens, Jews and heretics as good for nothing, as unfit to exist and unworthy of life.'[9]

If Kung is right, what we believe about the life of the world to come is no private matter of little consequence to others. Rather, it is a matter of great importance which we need to think through very carefully, attending well to the teaching of Jesus and to the witness of Scripture.

4. Universalism

All people will be raised to a further process of moral and spiritual development, leading eventually to the final victory of the love of God in the redemption of every individual. This is the view usually known as universalism, or the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. It does not hold that all people will be admitted to blessedness at death whatever their life has been on earth. Judgment is still a reality to be faced unless by the grace of God it is already past. However, it rejects the concept of eternal punishment or the final extinction of any person.

There are texts which support this view. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul writes, 'as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ'. As John Hick points out, in this verse 'the second "all" can hardly have a narrower domain than the first'.[10] Other universalist

passages in Paul's writings are Romans 5:18, Romans 11:32, and in works of disputed Pauline authorship, Ephesians 1:10 and 1 Timothy 2:4.

Of course, there are also Pauline texts which tell against universalism. When Scripture itself is not unanimous, the decision has to be made on other grounds. Very simply stated by Hick, a supporter of the view, the theological argument for universalism runs as follows: 'The God whom we worship is a God of love, whose gracious purpose is to save all [people]. God 's relation to the universe, as its creator and ruler, is such that he is able to fulfil his purposes. Therefore all [people] will in the end be saved.[11]

It is often argued that God's love could not be victorious, and God would be defeated, if in the end even a single person were to be lost. That is not to say that God will over-ride the freedom given to God's creatures, but to affirm that God's love is such that in the end, in the world to come if not here, it will win over every rebellious will.

Karl Barth, the foremost theologian of the twentieth century, was inclined to universalism, though he would never declare himself unequivocally, because he believed it would be compromising God's sovereign freedom to assert unequivocally that God surely will save all people.

Conclusion

If we take seriously the teaching of Jesus and the New Testament generally, we may have hope for a life beyond death. Neither Jesus nor the New Testament dwells on the nature of that life. Jesus never tried to describe it. All he would say is, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled ... In my Father's house there are many dwelling places' (John 14:1f.). If he had said more we would only have misunderstood. However we conceive of it, heaven is not to be thought of as an endless boring rest, or the singing of interminable hallelujahs, but in terms of peace, joy and fulfilment.

The few things Jesus had to say on this subject do not encourage us to give all our attention to it. The real business before us is the living of this life, whose span is limited and in which, therefore, no opportunity must be missed for the service of God and the service of our fellow human beings. At the same time, we are encouraged to live with the confidence that nothing we do as an offering to God is done in vain and that nothing, neither death nor life ... nor things present, nor things to come ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counsellor?
Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen.
(Romans 11:33-36)

Notes

[1] A.T. Hanson: 'Eschatology' in A. Richardson, ed.: *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, S.C.M. Press, 1969, p. 114.
[2] R.H. Fuller: *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, S.C.M. Press, 1954.
[3] T.W. Manson: *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, 1935, chapter 8.
[4] G. Kaufman: *Systematic Theology*: A Historicist Perspective, Scribners, 1968, p. 316.
[5] O. Cullmann: *Christ and Time*, S.C.M. Press, 1951.
[6] E. Kubler-Ross: *On Death and Dying*, Macmillan, 1970
[7] And thou, most kind and gentle death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him, Alleluia!
Number 3 in the *Australian Hymn Book*.
[8] G. Kaufman: *Systematic Theology*, p. 464.
[9] H. Kung: *Eternal Life?*, Collins, 1984, p. 167.
[10] J. Hick: *Death and Eternal Life*, Collins, 1976, p. 247.
[11] J. Hick: *Death and Eternal Life*, p. 242.

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