

Who would have thought that the doctrine of the Trinity could be so practical, and so enjoyable? Thomas Johnson has related the Trinity to the Christian faith, life, and worldview in a way that is soundly biblical, solidly anchored in historic Christianity, and attractive to the heart. The reader will be challenged to recognize the importance of this vital doctrine, to embrace its truth, and to enjoy knowing the glorious Lord it describes. I highly recommend it!

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John Wiers, Ph.D. Presbyterian Theologian

"There is nothing so central to Christian faith and difficult to understand as the Trinity. Dr Johnson provides here what the church desperately needs: a clearly-written and eminently practical guide to seeing the beauty of God in the mystery of His triune being."

Gerald McDermott, Ph.D. Anglican Theologian

As a young man, Tom Johnson found himself to be a member of a small church that was rapidly becoming an authoritarian, legalistic, irrational cult. After observing the destructive results of this pseudo-church in the lives of its members, Johnson and some other students began a biblical critique of the movement which led to its disintegration and collapse. Some former members rejected the Christian faith because of what they had experienced. Johnson began an anxious quest for an alternate model or paradigm on what the Christian faith and life are, because he felt that continuing to be a practicing Christian might be possible with a better overall perspective on what Christians should believe and how they should live. This book contains some of the fruit of his anxious quest, a renewed Trinitarian faith and worldview.



Johnson has served as the pastor of three evangelical churches and taught philosophy or theology in ten universities and theological schools in nine countries. He is currently Vice President for Research for Martin Bucer Seminary (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, and Turkey), Adjunct Professor of Social Studies at Vilnius Pedagogical University (Lithuania), Professor of Theology, Philosophy and Public Policy for the International Institute for Christian Studies, and Director of the Comenius Institute (Prague, Czech Republic).

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Dr. Thomas Schirmacher

Thomas K. Johnson What Difference Does Trinity Make?

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Thomas K. Johnson

# What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

A Complete Faith, Life, and Worldview



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WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE



Thomas K. Johnson

What Difference Does the Trinity Make?  
A Complete Faith, Life, and Worldview



# The WEA Global Issues Series

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**What Difference Does the Trinity Make?  
A Complete Faith, Life, and Worldview**

The WEA Global Issues Series  
Volume 7

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## The Trinity and Real Life

The Trinity has often fallen into disregard, not because alternative teachings have better arguments from the Bible or present a more logical faith but because believers have not known or seen what difference the Trinity makes for their everyday life and faith and what consequences other views have.

To concentrate on the practical implications of the Trinity does not mean that the doctrine of the Trinity is only true if it pays, i.e., if I gain something from it. Of course, for evangelicals, God's revelation in the Bible, uncovered by good exegesis, must have the last word. But the Bible itself teaches, and evangelicals have always emphasized, that faith is about love, trust, and fellowship, and that these realities affect life in practical ways. Faith in God is authentic only if it touches every area of life and the world.

I first started to really love the doctrine of the Trinity and the Triune God himself when I realized that love (between the persons of the Trinity) is older than the created world. A God having love, fellowship, and communication within himself from all eternity created a world with persons created in his image – us humans – depending on love, fellowship, and communication. In monotheistic religions without the Trinity, there is no one to be loved before creation. Love is, so to speak, invented with creation. In Christianity, God is love, and he loved long before creation; he created the world out of love and with the goal of love. This is the major reason why *love* is the label name of Christianity and why God does not only love since creation; love is from eternity to eternity.

I am grateful that this book is written by a Christian who has a child-like faith, a pastor's heart, a teacher's ability, and a philosopher's mind, who does not see a difference between these roles. He really believes a better response to the Trinity will reduce distortions in our lives as Christians *and* overcome many reasons to reject the faith.

Tom Johnson has taught in several countries of Europe and Asia and has loved the cultures in which he lived. In his work, he has always been an evangelical pastor and missionary and, at the same time, a professor of philosophy at secular universities, e.g., in Minsk (Belarus) and Prague (Czech Republic). I hope that his book has a global message, not just a Westerner's perspective. But I invite our friends from the Global South to contribute to our series. We need your wisdom and perspectives, so that the whole body of Christ can learn and interact.

*Thomas Schirrmacher, Speaker on Human Rights of the World Evangelical Alliance; Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance*



## Forword

On January 20, 1975, I felt a massive sense of relief. I found myself to be a member of a small church that was rapidly becoming an authoritarian, legalistic, irrational cult. After observing the destructive results of this pseudo-church in the lives of its members, some other students and I had begun a biblical critique of the movement which led to its eventual disintegration and collapse. On this date, I decided I had to leave this group, called Agape Christian Fellowship, and either find an alternate form of Christianity or reject the Christian faith. After this decision, it felt like a ton of bricks was removed from my shoulders. I could breathe and think again.

Some former members from the cult-like group left the Christian faith because of what they had experienced. I felt compelled to begin a search for an alternate model or paradigm of what the Christian faith and life are; I thought it might be possible to continue to be a practicing Christian if I could find a better overall perspective on what Christians should believe and how they should live.

For about six months I spent a huge amount of time reading the Bible, since I thought any serious Christian faith had to be deeply rooted in the Bible. Therefore, I needed to become familiar with the entire Bible very quickly. I also read sample books published or distributed by various churches, in order to see alternate paradigms on the faith. These books began to drive me into despair and cynicism; I threw some in the garbage because the authors claimed to be describing the Christian faith but showed they had no familiarity with the Bible. I tore other books in pieces because the authors deeply insulted the reader by contradicting themselves every three pages while assuming the reader was too stupid to notice all the contradictions. I wondered if a biblically informed and self-consistent Christian faith was even possible. I was never attracted to so-called liberal theology because it seemed like an attempt to think like an atheist and still go to church on Sunday. Should I become an atheist?

Then I read a book from the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In just a few hours I realized that it was totally different from the other books I had read about the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> The authors were deeply familiar with the Bible and had invested significant effort into a careful understanding of each biblical text they mentioned. They presented a consistent overall picture and description of God, human beings, and the world, which did not insult the intelligence of the reader; indeed, this perspective offered

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<sup>1</sup>This book was the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Later I read both Martin Luther and John Calvin.

hope of providing a point of integration for my university studies in the humanities and social sciences. And here I encountered a powerful witness to God's grace and providence for which my heart was longing.

On August 1, 1975, I concluded that my quest was complete. I was prepared to live and die as a Christian whose faith and life would be guided by the Reformation. Later that night I came to think I should regard my quest and its conclusion as God's call to become a pastor and teacher inspired by Reformation convictions.

This little book is a fruit of my quest from more than 30 years ago. A good way to understand the classical evangelical faith is to see it as trust in and response to all three Persons of the Trinity; a deeper understanding of the Trinity can bring balance and depth to our faith, while also providing a suitable outline for the entire biblical message. If the leaders of Agape Christian Fellowship had understood and taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son in order to enable our response to the Father and the Son, the church might have been highly distinctive, but it would not have been cult-like. This book is intended for people who do not want to get burned out by a distorted faith, or perhaps it can be a way back into the faith for those feel like they have been burned by a distorted version of the faith. (I suspect that much of the resistance to Christianity in Europe and North America is related to a feeling of having been burned by the Christian faith that came from an encounter with a distorted version of the faith.) Almost every page contains a response to some distortion of the faith which I had encountered by the time I was 20 years old; I have been carrying some of these responses in my mind since 1975. If God gives me health, time, and energy, I would like to write two more little books in each of which I try to give a balanced and complete overview of the Christian faith and life in short form, as I have attempted in this text.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

## *The Complete Faith and Life*

### **Responding to the Three Persons of the Trinity**

Christian history is filled with stories of people who thought they should do very strange things as part of their Christian life and faith. Already in the New Testament there were reports of people who thought they had to be circumcised or keep Jewish food laws in order to be good Christians. Apparently some others thought they could not be married and be good Christians. A couple hundred years later we encounter people who thought that sitting on top of a tall pole in the desert was a tremendous aid to Christian spirituality. Many others, over the centuries, have thought that believers should withdraw from the general society into separated communities as part of an attempt to become holy. Some have used strange methods of self punishment, attempting to drive sin from their bodies.

In my own experience, I have known people who claimed that if we are really “walking in the Spirit” we will be able to levitate from place to place and not need to use our “flesh,” meaning our feet and legs, to cross the street or move around. Some of these same people thought it was great to be nourished by visions of McDonald’s hamburgers and French fries while they were fasting. This experience forced me to start thinking very seriously and precisely about what I believe as a Christian and what type of life flows from that belief. Later I wondered if that was blasphemy, thinking that God had such poor taste in food. Much later I realized that these terrible distortions of the Christian faith and life have at least three horrible effects: 1. They leave many believers personally miserable and therefore ineffective in building up the body of Christ; 2. Serious distortions of the faith tend to drive children of believers away from the faith of their parents, since what they see and experience is not something beautiful or spiritually attractive; 3. And ugly distortions of the faith make the watching world turn away from believers, alternately in disgust or in pity, seeing nothing to draw them to the faith.<sup>1</sup>

There is also another type of distorted faith that somehow supports or leads to the distorted lives just mentioned. In the last century we have heard of “Demythologized Christianity,” which rejects the supposed

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<sup>1</sup> These observations are inspired by comments of Francis Schaeffer in *The Church before the Watching World*, which is included in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: a Christian Worldview*, Vol. 4, *A Christian View of the Church* (Crossway Books, 1982). Christians whose lives and faith are marked by this first set of distortions are usually not effectively “in the world,” using the classical evangelical paradigm that believers should be “in the world” but not “of the world.” This paradigm comes from John 17:14–18.

myths in the Bible, maybe even including the resurrection of Jesus, as unnecessary to real faith. In place of these “myths,” Jesus was reinterpreted within the worldview of Existentialism. Then there was Marxist Christianity or Liberation Theology, which sometimes claimed that a real life of faith would be expressed by promoting a proletarian revolution or by supporting Communism. These people usually reinterpreted the biblical message inside the worldview proposed by Karl Marx. In Europe there was also National Socialist Christianity, whose representatives thought good Christians should support Adolf Hitler as the representative of God’s work in the world today. These people reinterpreted the biblical message inside the worldview offered by Hitler and the National Socialists. Maybe in reaction, others claimed what is needed is religionless or even atheistic Christianity, really odd proposals which attempt to understand and appropriate the gospel inside an atheistic worldview. And today there are plenty of representatives of Postmodern Christianity, who want to reinterpret the biblical message inside the fragmented anti-worldview of Postmodernism.<sup>2</sup>

What unites these examples of distorted Christian lives and strange types of supposedly Christian faith is the problem that whole sections or parts of the biblical faith are missing. In the distorted types of spirituality, religious zeal is not guided by a balanced standard of basic Christian teaching or basic theology, because that basic theology is not present in the minds and lives of the people. In the other examples, which we might call liberal or modern or Cartesian theology, the biblical faith and life are misinterpreted because a secular worldview overrules or filters out parts of the biblical message; much of basic Christian teaching or basic theology is lacking because it is replaced by parts of a secular worldview or philosophy.

These two problems are very similar, perhaps the same, even though they may look quite different. When people come to faith, they do not instantly give up all of their previous beliefs about the universe, human nature, and society. The human mind is never truly empty; there are certain questions about life and the world which people simply cannot avoid, and if people do not have biblical answers to these questions, they will, almost necessarily, hold answers to these questions that are in conflict

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<sup>2</sup> This type of analysis is suggested by Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, Vol. 1, Prolegomena: *The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). Believers whose faith and life are distorted in this manner are usually “of the world,” in terms of the evangelical dictum that we should be “in the world” but not “of the world.” For more on the relation of faith and the world see Thomas K. Johnson, “Christ and Culture,” MBS Text at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu) which is also at [www.WRFnet.org](http://www.WRFnet.org).

with the biblical message. These old beliefs or this old worldview often continues to function as a blueprint or structure of the mind of believers that shapes everything else they believe, so they are unconsciously prevented from accepting parts of the total biblical message. This is true whether we are looking at misguided religious zeal or liberal, modern theology. In all of these stories there is one common thread: major parts of Christian belief are missing or lacking.

Probably a similar situation caused the apostle Paul to wonder if the early believers in the city of Ephesus had heard that there is a Holy Spirit (Acts 19). One can also ask if many believers throughout Christian history have heard that there are both a Father and a Son. What people need is a balanced and more complete approach to the Christian faith and life. Believers need “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) as it is taught in the Scriptures. To understand, remember, and consciously appropriate the whole counsel of God, it helps us to have simple summaries of what God is like, what he has proclaimed to us, and how we should understand our world before God. Such simple summaries can serve as blueprints or structures of the Christian mind, replacing an unbelieving worldview and helping to remind us of the major themes of the Christian faith.

The most basic of these simple summaries is the doctrine of the Trinity. It is a serious mistake to see the Trinity as an archaic piece of metaphysical trivia from the early church. The doctrine of the Trinity is a description of who God is and what each Person of God typically does or has done. Therefore we can begin moving toward a balanced and complete Christian faith and life by actively seeing the Christian life as a deep trust in and conscious response to the work of each of the three Persons of the Trinity. In this way the doctrine of the Trinity can become the blueprint, outline, or scheme of the renewed Christian mind.<sup>3</sup>

In the carefully chosen, classical words of the Westminster Confession, the doctrine of the Trinity claims, “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”<sup>4</sup> Such a precise manner of talking about God was not the result of academic speculation. The New Testament believers encountered God

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<sup>3</sup> This present essay is intended to be the first of three essays on basic Christian doctrine. Each of these essays is intended to present a summary of the Christian faith in a way that shows that the biblical message has a real internal structure which leads to a balanced, deep, and authentic faith and life. They will also show that the biblical message is an entire worldview or philosophy. See also footnote 6 below.

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter II, paragraph 3.

in three ways: They knew God the Father as the Creator, Sustainer, and Law-Giver, in whose presence they had always lived; they knew Jesus as the one who taught them, fed them, washed their feet, forgave them, died on the cross, and then rose again, and they were shocked to realize that this ordinary-looking Jewish man was not only an extraordinary man but also the Christ, and truly God; they knew the Holy Spirit, who was poured out on them at Pentecost, who entered into them and changed them within in ways they never expected; and they knew that this was all one God, whom they encountered in three ways.

The early church then articulated this understanding of God from Scripture and the history of redemption to overcome the terrible assaults on the faith that arose from various heresies and from the entirety of pagan Greco-Roman culture. If the early church had not clearly stated this basic Christian doctrine, the gospel and distinctively Christian beliefs would have been dissolved into a vague religiosity in which any grasp of God's grace and the biblical worldview would have been lost. Today when evangelical Christians talk about the Trinity, it is often in a context of contrasting the biblical faith with the various cults, which are not Trinitarian. This approach is good and necessary, and really extends the work of the early Christian theologians who helped give clarity to this biblical teaching in response to the cults and heresies of their day. This line of teaching leads to the excellent sermons one sometimes hears that show the role of each person of the Trinity in our salvation, a theme that calls us to greater gratitude for the tremendous grace we have received. This application of the doctrine of the Trinity has great value and should be developed in the churches.

We should also go one step farther with the doctrine of the Trinity: to look at the way in which the Christian life and mind can be structured by the doctrine of the Trinity, so our personal, intellectual, and church life can become a conscious, thoughtful response to the work of each Person of God.<sup>5</sup> This essay is an attempt to outline part of what that would mean, to help us start thinking of life as a response to each divine Person. The way to start this way of thinking is to ask three questions: 1. What difference should it make in my life or our lives that we believe in God the Father? 2. What difference should it make in my life or our lives that we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? 3. What differ-

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<sup>5</sup> If people do not consciously believe in all three Persons of God, as well as in the unity of God, they have a strong tendency to believe in something else as a substitute belief. In most serious distortions of the Christian faith, believers substitute some other belief in place of something they should believe as part of a Trinitarian faith.

ence should it make in my life or our lives if we believe that the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into the world? All three questions must be asked and answered with open Bibles.

There is, of course, an important sense in which many of God's acts are the acts of all three Persons together. Though we customarily see creation as primarily the work of God the Father, Scripture makes very clear that the Son and the Spirit also played important roles in creation. John 1:3 says, "All things were made through him;" that is, through Christ. And in Genesis 1:2 we read that "the Spirit was hovering over the waters," reminding us that the Holy Spirit was active with the Father and the Son from the very beginning of time. And we have already noted the many good sermons on the work of each of the three Persons in redemption. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity are active in both creation and redemption. Nevertheless, the Bible describes the different Persons as having significantly different roles, and these different roles are nicely summarized by the Apostles' Creed. Each of the three articles of the Creed describes in short form the work of one Person of the Trinity. This makes it possible to talk about dimensions and aspects of the Christian life that follow from a first-article faith, meaning faith in "God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." It is also possible and proper to talk about dimensions and aspects of the Christian life that follow from faith in the second article about Jesus and redemption, as well as from the third article about the pouring out of the Spirit on the church. Such a consciously Trinitarian approach to life has the advantages of not only being thoughtful and balanced; it is also clearly rooted in the most fundamental of Christian belief structures, that about the very nature of God.<sup>6</sup> We should all rise to the challenge stated by Herman Bavinck when he claimed, "The thoughtful person places the doctrine of the Trinity in the very center of the full-orbed life of nature and mankind."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It would be proper to say that the biblical message has three types of belief structures or short summaries of the faith that help us attain full and balanced lives; these are the ontological, historical, and kerygmatic structures of the biblical message. If properly used and understood, each leads to balance, completeness, and beauty in the church, the lives of believers, and God's calling/mission for believers. The doctrine of the Trinity describes the ontological belief structure; creation-Fall-redemption is the historical structure; while the relationship between Law and Gospel is the kerygmatic structure. In this way basic Christian doctrines form the structure of the Christian worldview, which is also a complete philosophy answering all the fundamental human questions and providing a framework in which all learning and knowledge has its place.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, translated and edited by William Hendriksen (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 329.

## The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the  
Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hell; the third day he arose again from the dead,  
He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father  
Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the  
dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of  
the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and  
the life everlasting.

The Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles, but it contains the central elements of the gospel proclaimed by the apostles. With very slight variations in wording, it has been used as a simple summary of central Christian beliefs since very early in Christian history. In early Christian history it was recited especially at the time of baptism, as a Triune statement of faith which nicely explained baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

## The Trinity and the Bible

This book assumes that the classical Christian teaching on the Trinity is consistent with the Bible, though this claim will not be documented at length. The reader who is uncertain that the Triune nature of God is taught in the Bible should carefully consider some of the many relevant biblical texts on this theme. Though the technical language of the classical Christian creeds is not used in the Bible, this careful way of speaking about God flows organically from the entire Bible. A few selected texts which the reader may want to consider:

- Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–13; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:29–34
- Matthew 28:18–20
- John 1:1–18
- John 15:26–27; John 16:5–15
- Romans 1:1–6
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Ephesians 2:14–22
- 1 Peter 1:1–2



See also the study and discussion questions at the end of this chapter.

Though the teaching about the Trinity comes mostly in the New Testament, there are many places where the Old Testament points toward understanding God as a Trinity. Some of these texts are:

- Psalm 2
- Psalm 45
- Psalm 110

Our understanding of the Trinity is closely associated with our understanding Jesus, the Christ, who is fully God and fully man, yet one Person. This classical Christian teaching is also assumed in this book, though it will not be defended at length. A few biblical texts the reader may wish to consider on this topic:

- Matthew 9:1–8; 11:25–30; 14:22–32
- Mark 4:35–41
- John 3:16–36; 5:16–27; 20:24–29
- Romans 5:15–17; 9:1–5
- 1 Corinthians 2:6–10
- Hebrews 1:1–13; 2:5–18; 4:14–16; 5:7–9
- 1 John 1:1–4; 4:1–3
- 2 John 7–8

## Early Distortions of the Christian Faith

Though the New Testament Christian believers encountered God as Triune and talked about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it took some time before the pastors and teachers of the church were able to clearly articulate a well considered doctrine of the Trinity. The Council of Nicea, in the year 325, was a crucial step in this process; one of the most important claims of this council is that Jesus, the Son of God, is of the same essence as the Father. Though the teaching of this council was not immediately accepted by all who called themselves Christians, after some time the teaching of Nicea was recognized as a standard for all orthodox Christians. The orthodox theory of the Trinity articulated at Nicea was a profound attempt to overcome life-destroying misunderstandings of basic Christian beliefs. The practical life significance of this teaching is seen by taking a brief look at a few of the early distortions of the Christian life, all of which were based on fundamentally mistaken paradigms regarding basic Christian beliefs.

## Marcionism

Marcion was a wealthy ship owner and devout believer from Asia Minor who moved to Rome about 139. He was also very intelligent and a generous philanthropist. He began to call the Roman Christians to a renewed faith and a seriously holy life; holy people would not eat meat or engage in sexual intercourse; therefore husbands and wives were ordered to separate and live in celibacy. Why did he have this peculiar understanding of a holy life? Because Marcion's basic beliefs had a very peculiar structure.

Marcion taught that Christians must not obscure the gospel by combining it with Judaism. The God of the Old Testament, he thought, was an evil God who created a world filled with evil, cruelty, and suffering. The human body and soul were created by this evil being, who is also vindictive and stern in his enforcement of an inflexible law. But Jesus came and revealed a new God, who had remained hidden until the coming of Jesus. This new God is a God of mercy and love who only requires that people respond in love and mercy. But Jesus could not really become a man with a human soul and body, since such an incarnation would bring Jesus (and the new God revealed by Jesus) into close contact with the evil physical world created by the evil Old Testament God. Jesus only *appeared* to be a man, though in fact he avoided *becoming* human. Real followers of Jesus should have as little as possible to do with physical flesh, and therefore they should not eat meat or have sexual contact.

Of course Marcion rejected the Old Testament from his list of holy books. His canon of Scripture included only some of Paul's epistles and the book of Luke, but he took out of these Scriptures all those parts in which Jesus is seen as positively related to the God of the Old Testament. All those parts of the epistles of Paul and in the Gospel of Luke which talked about a positive relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament God, Marcion claimed, were added to these books by later hands and were not part of the original gospel.<sup>8</sup>

With the distance of history, it is clear that Marcion and his numerous followers came to the Bible with a worldview that is alien to the Bible and did not allow the Bible to correct or change their worldview. Marcion had accepted the worldview we can call *Hellenism*, which was common in his world; Hellenism normally said that everything physical is evil and

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<sup>8</sup> More on Marcion and his movement can be found in any good history of the early church. This summary of his teaching is largely taken from Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, third edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, volume 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (Harper & Row, 1975).

only unseen spiritual realities are good. He then understood his serious faith in light of his previous Hellenistic belief structure. Probably without Marcion ever being aware of it, his previous worldview functioned as a filter or screen which controlled what parts of the biblical message he could accept. This meant that major parts of the biblical message are missing or rejected by Marcion, and this led to a distorted approach to the Christian life. This is one of the problems to which the early church was responding when it clarified the doctrine of the Trinity.

As soon as we confess that God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, then we have also confessed that the work and message of Jesus are continuous with the work of the Father in creation; that the New Testament is a completion, not a rejection, of the Old Testament. This also leads one to assume that the works of the Holy Spirit, including his gifts, power, and leading, will be consistent with the work of the Father and the Son. The holy and serious Christian life will be seen as consistent with the commands given by God from the very beginning, from the time of Adam and Eve. And physical flesh, whether human or animal, will be seen as part of God's creation, while evil, cruelty, and suffering should be seen as distortions of God's purposes in creation.

## *Gnosticism*

Gnosticism is hard to describe, because various historians have used various definitions and because there were so many different varieties of Gnosticism. But it is worth knowing something about the movement, since it may have almost overwhelmed Christians in the second and third centuries, and since it has many similarities to the various ideas often called "New Age" in more recent times. The early church clarified its teaching about the Trinity partly in response to the distorted faith and life of partly Christian Gnostics.<sup>9</sup>

The Gnostics generally taught that human souls had a heavenly existence prior to this life, but something happened in that heavenly existence which caused souls to fall from heaven into a physical body. But the good god sent a heavenly redeemer who gives secret knowledge to fallen souls about their forgotten previous state, which allows them to return to this higher form of life. Individual souls are seen as sparks of a heavenly Primal Man, a representative of Light. Evil demonic forces of darkness tore the Primal Man into pieces and created the world we see from these pieces. But if a soul has received the proper secret knowledge, after

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<sup>9</sup> This explanation of Gnosticism is heavily dependent on Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity & the Hellenistic World* (Dallas: Probe Ministries, 1984), pp. 203–239.

death it is able to return to its original home in the realm of Light. Some versions of Gnosticism totally rejected any mention of Jesus or the Bible, but in the partly Christian versions of Gnosticism, Jesus is seen as the heavenly redeemer who gives secret knowledge to fallen souls. Redemption, according to the Gnostics, is not based on the death and resurrection of Jesus; secret knowledge is always the key to redemption.

There is a multifaceted dualism in Gnosticism. There is conflict between two worlds (light and darkness), two superhuman forces (a god of light and the demons of darkness), and two parts of human nature (a good soul within an evil body). “God, spirit, and light are diametrically opposed to demons, matter, and darkness.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, “the basic question of human existence is how to achieve deliverance from matter and finally to return to the world of light and the god of that world.”<sup>11</sup> The term “Gnosticism” refers to knowledge; *gnosis* in Greek means knowledge. This is a good term for the movement, since the key is how to attain the secret knowledge that will allow the soul to escape matter and return to the world of spirit.

All the forms of Gnosticism that tried to remain partly Christian were “Docetic.” Docetism is a view of Jesus Christ that says he only appeared to be human and did not have a true human body and soul. This term is based on the Greek verb *doceo*, which means “to appear,” as if Jesus only appeared to be human and was not truly human (as well as divine). On this topic the Gnostics were similar to Marcion and his followers. In terms of lifestyle, some Gnostics thought people should very rigorously repress their physical flesh by avoiding eating meat, avoiding marriage and sex, fasting extensively, etc. But other Gnostics taught that since our souls will leave the prison of the evil body, it does not matter what we do with our bodies; there are no moral restrictions of any sort at all.

Many of the Gnostics thought they were Christians, but from the distance of history it is clear that Gnosticism is a totally different worldview from Christianity. The so-called “Christian Gnostics” were interpreting their Christianity inside an alien worldview, similar to how Christians later interpreted their faith inside of Nazi or Marxist or Existentialist worldviews. One of the central tools the early Christian pastors and teachers used to contrast the biblical gospel with Gnosticism was the simple Trinitarian creed. As soon as Christians confessed that they believed that God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, was the same God as Jesus, the Word become flesh, the entire Gnostic worldview was replaced by the Christian worldview. And this then led to a more bal-

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<sup>10</sup> Nash, p. 220.

<sup>11</sup> Nash, p. 221.

anced and complete approach to the life of faith. The doctrine of the Trinity was the key to rejecting an alien worldview or religion, as well as the key to a full and fruitful Christian life.

### *Arianism*

Arianism is named after Arius, a church leader from Alexandria, Egypt, from around the year 300 A.D. Arius is famous for claiming that Jesus was of “like substance” with God the Father, *homoiousion* in Greek. In contrast, the Council of Nicea said that Jesus is of the “same substance” with God the Father, *homoousion* in Greek. But in that one-letter difference in spelling there is not only a difference in metaphysics; there is an entirely different religion, faith, and life. As articulated by Athanasius<sup>12</sup> and the other great preachers over the centuries, if Jesus is only “a lot like” God, then we are left without a Savior. The human race needs a Savior who is truly God, as well as truly human. If Jesus is only “like” God, not God in the flesh, then we do not have a real Savior. Then there is no hope for salvation, since we cannot save ourselves. That one-letter difference in spelling a technical term in Christian metaphysics is the difference between the hopelessness of attempting to save ourselves and the good news of the gospel of God’s grace in Christ.

What this means is that the doctrine of the Trinity, and the closely related doctrine of the incarnation (and two natures) of Christ, is the foundation for believing in the grace of God in Christ. If there is no Trinity and no incarnation, we are without hope, since the only alternative is the hopeless path of trying to earn God’s favor and salvation. At its core, the doctrine of the Trinity makes God’s undeserved grace in Christ the very center of our faith and life. This is what gives balance, completeness, and even beauty to a life lived in conscious response to all three Persons of the divine Trinity.

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<sup>12</sup> The name of Athanasius should be mentioned because his efforts were critical in convincing the church of exactly this point. He attended the Council of Nicea in 325 as an assistant to Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius became Bishop of Alexandria at the death of Alexander and spent about 45 years in this job, teaching, preaching, and arguing for the full deity of Jesus Christ. He faced much opposition.

## The Nicene Creed

The “Nicene Creed” contains the teaching approved by the Council of Nicea in 325, but the exact wording and format probably come from the Council of Constantinople in 381. (In contrast, the exact wording of the creed approved at Nicea is sometimes called “The Creed of Nicea.”) For this reason it is sometimes also called “The Creed of Constantinople.” The teaching of the creeds from Nicea and Constantinople were fully approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The text of the Nicene Creed follows:

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance (homoousion) with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and comes again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father,<sup>13</sup> who with the Father and the Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets:

In one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church:

We acknowledge one baptism unto remission of sins. We look for a resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come.<sup>14</sup>

The early church saw massive distortions of the Christian life; it also saw the entire Christian message seriously distorted when that message was misinterpreted because of the reigning power of alien world-views. The doctrine of the Trinity, experienced by the earliest believers and assumed in the New Testament, was clearly articulated to assist in

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<sup>13</sup> At this point the Western churches later added the phrase “and the Son” to indicate that the Holy Spirit was sent out at Pentecost by both the Father and the Son and has similar relationships with the Father and the Son.

<sup>14</sup> This text is taken from *Documents of the Christian Church*, second edition, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 26. English spelling and grammar modernized.

teaching the full counsel of God, and thereby to overcome distortions in the faith of believers and to also overcome the power of non-biblical worldviews. The doctrine of the Trinity thus forms the core of Christian belief, the earliest outline of an entire biblical worldview, and an overview of the balanced, complete, and attractive Christian life. This faith, life, and worldview is summarized in the early great Trinitarian creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. And this outline can greatly assist believers today who face problems and challenges similar to those of the earliest followers of Jesus.

## Study Questions

1. List some more examples of serious distortions of the Christian faith, remembering to be gracious to fellow Christians while making this list. Then ask what themes of the Christian faith are missing from their faith and life. Now ask yourself, What important themes of the Christian faith are missing from your faith and life?
2. Try to list more examples of distortions of the Christian faith that resulted from believers reinterpreting or misinterpreting the biblical message because of a secular worldview or philosophy of life. In what ways can a secular worldview or value system prevent people from fully hearing and accepting parts of the biblical message? What worldviews or value systems could have that effect in your Christian circles or in your personal faith and life?
3. Before reading the rest of this book, try to write a short description of what each Person of the Trinity does and how we should respond to each Person of the Trinity.
4. Sometimes the New Testament apostles used a Trinitarian outline to remind believers of the core elements of the gospel. Two good examples are 1 Peter 1:3–12 and Ephesians 1:3–14. In these two biblical texts, how is the work of each Person of the Trinity described? Can you find other biblical texts that use a Trinitarian outline?

# 1 Life in Light of the First Article of the Creed

Sometimes a strange question can clarify our thoughts. Ask yourself, How would life be different if we believed in the second and third articles of the Creed but did not believe that God is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth? That would indeed be a strange faith and life, perhaps similar to some of the distortions which arose in the first and second centuries of the church (especially Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Docetism). In reaction, we should be moved to clarify what the first article claims. When we say we believe in creation, we are saying we believe that God is the only source of all that exists, including matter, energy, time, space, causality, beauty, and ourselves; truly God is far greater than we can ever comprehend or imagine, and all our thoughts fail to give him the honor to which he is due. He even created the minds and words we use to describe his greatness. The first article of the Christian creed answers that first and deepest question we face: What is the ultimate Ground of Being, which is self-existent, which has always existed, the ultimate Cause and ultimate Goal of everything else? The question answered by belief in the Creator is so fundamental to human life, that if people do not believe in God the Creator, they have a strong tendency to ascribe some of his divine attributes to some part of creation and say that matter and energy or time and chance are the source of all that exists. People have to believe something about the origin of this world, and the biblical answer is the most profound answer available.

When we say we believe in creation, we are also saying God gave his creation a specific order, structure, direction, and nature, part of which he built into human nature. The doctrine of creation says much about our world, about ourselves and how we should live, about knowledge, and about society. This is worth detailing:

## A. God the Father and the Goodness of Creation

God made the world **good**. In the opening chapter of Genesis we are told several times that the world God made is good. And then to avoid all misunderstanding, we are told, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31) This theme is emphasized, as if people might have a tendency to forget that the earth and the heavens were made by God, belong to God, and are therefore both real and good. Of course, this is what has happened over and over again. As noted before, in ancient Greece and in the various types of Hellenistic religion and philosophy, people doubted the goodness of the physical world. In some types of Indian religion (often called Hinduism), people doubt the reality of the



physical world. The physical realm is seen as “Maya,” or illusion. And these ways of thinking tend to reappear even among Christians. People too often think that to find authentic spirituality, we have to flee from the physical world into an unseen spiritual world. But if the creation is good, it means that we should seek to serve God and find authentic spirituality within the everyday world of creation and created structures. It also means we can accept the everyday gifts of God, whether these are family and friends, work or relaxation, as truly good gifts for which we can give thanks and which we can enjoy for the glory of God.

If we believe in the goodness of creation, we will have very little inclination to do things like sit on a pole in order to meditate. Whether or not we are married, we will see marriage (and therefore sexuality) as part of God’s good creation, not something to be avoided for the sake of becoming more holy. And we will expect God to nourish us physically by means of food, not by means of visions of food.

If creation was and is good, then it becomes clear that evil, pain, tragedy, and suffering are not part of God’s purposes in creation. Certainly nothing is outside the providence of the Almighty God, including great evils, since he knows and controls everything, but the Creator is not the source of evil. Many of the evil things which we experience are somehow the result of the human free choice of sin, or else the risks of living in a world which God made to follow certain orderly rules (the “laws of nature”), or else tools in God’s hand by which he pushes us to deep maturity. Illness and death, though allowed by God, are also God’s enemies, which he will defeat at the end of history. At the end of time we will see the full goodness of creation restored, though right now evil sometimes makes it difficult for people to fully grasp and experience the full goodness of created reality.

## B. God the Father and the Creation of Mankind

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image’” (Genesis 1:26). Belief that God is our creating Father also answers the second deepest question in the human heart: Who and What are we? The answer is that God created us for a relationship with himself, and therefore our human reason, will, and emotions are intended to be a created reflection of his uncreated reason, will, and emotions. What a magnificent destiny we have been given! How awesome it is to daily interact with other creatures with the same temporal and eternal destiny! How monumentally tragic it is when people are described and treated as mere creatures of dust and descendants of animals! And this often happens when people are not described as created in the image of God. Then people think and feel like their own

value, and the value of the lives of others, is based on their abilities or accomplishments and is not a free gift of their Creator. This becomes both a personal psychological problem and a philosophical problem that undermines respect for human dignity in society. This is not only an affront to the pinnacle of creation; it is a personal insult to the Creator. Belief in the first article of the Christian Creed will profoundly change how we think and feel about ourselves and others. This faith will explain both our own longing for significance and our intuitions that our neighbors and relatives are somehow worthy of respect and care. As the Psalmist reflected, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, and stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” (Psalm 8: 3–5) The value of each human being, and the goodness of the various parts of our humanness including heart, soul, mind, and strength, are gifts of our creating Father. These gifts must be accepted with joy and thanksgiving.

When God created us in his image, he did not leave us with empty hearts and minds that would be like a computer without any software. Connecting the picture of human nature in the Bible with computer language, we might say that God created us with a lot of software already built in, ready to be activated by life experience. This includes not only the ability to understand God’s world; we also came programmed with the ability to understand love, justice, loyalty, honesty, and the other unseen realities that make life interesting and either frustrating or meaningful. For this reason we long to experience such moral/spiritual realities, even while we sense that we never experience them totally in this world. People often long for The Good, for Real Justice, for Beauty Itself, and for True Truth, even if we have never seen such entities, whether or not we know that they exist. Our partial experiences of these realities on the human level point us toward God, in whom these realities are fully present and from whom the cries of our hearts receive their answers. God created us with the ability and need to recognize him as our Creator, even though our sin makes us hide from him. Because of the way God has created human beings, it is fitting and proper for people to expect to find the highest level of love, honesty, justice, loyalty, and beauty among the people who have come to know him as their Father.

### C. God the Father and the Cultural Mandate

“God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of

the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28) “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” (Genesis 2:15) Everywhere we look in the developed world, people are very busy and working hard. And through their hard work they develop careers and families, businesses and schools, cultural institutions and communities. Seldom do we stop and ask, “Why?” Maybe we do not want to recognize that all our work and activity is not only a human necessity for our own well-being and fulfillment, but that it is also a divine necessity, meaning this is how God created us. In all of this intense activity there is an often unrecognized demand, specifically, that God created us to be active in his world. Believers should recognize that this demand to be active comes from God, and if we are able to be active in his world, we should be active in his world for his glory. We must not misuse this idea and think that we must never rest. Rather, we should see the everyday realm of busy activity as our primary place of service to God. Believing in the first article of the Christian Creed means we must accept what some call the “cultural mandate;” God has called us to be sub-creators working within his creation to build families, societies, and cultures (really an entire civilization) that honor him as our Creator. And he has built this demand into us so deeply that we can hardly run from it, though some may not want to recognize that God is the One whom we should serve in all our activities.

It is possible and good to divide the cultural mandate into its separate parts and notice that God has built multiple mandates into human nature: a mandate and drive to work, a mandate and desire for marriage, a mandate and desire to have children and raise families, a mandate and longing to worship, and a mandate and need to create communities. This is what we see in the biblical creation account, across the many pages of the Bible, and what we see in society today. These different parts of the cultural mandate, given by God the Creator, usually come to expression in the wide range of social institutions: marriage, family, work, church, education, science, etc. For this reason we can talk about such institutions as “creation orders.” This term is a way of recognizing that God has ordered our lives by how he created us. The creation orders are part of God’s means of developing and preserving human life and culture from one generation to the next. For this reason the creation orders are a primary place where we serve God and love our neighbors. Recognizing the cultural mandate and the creation orders as coming from our Father is part of faith in the first article of the Christian creed.

Closely related to our work in the world as God’s sub-creators is the rapid growth of scientific and technological knowledge. Twenty-first century society is increasingly built on information and technology, though people seldom pause to wonder how it is possible for people to truly

understand the physical world of nature. Our answer should probably be in two parts. On the one hand, God created the world with a certain order built into it; the orderly days of creation are a strong hint in this direction. What we often call the “laws of nature” are descriptions of certain laws God has built into his creation, parts of the creation order. On the other hand, God has created the human mind and sense-abilities to be able to perceive and understand his world. There is a created correspondence between the world God made and our minds, which were made to be able to understand God’s world. For these reasons it is possible, with much hard work and many mistakes, for people to have an increasing knowledge of the physical world. And this increasing knowledge plays a massive role in the societal changes of our time. Without recognizing the creating work of our heavenly Father, we would have great difficulty explaining why such progress of scientific and technical knowledge is possible. Once we recognize that God makes the growth of knowledge possible, we can accept our better computers and improved medical care as gifts from our Father’s hand. God deserves far more gratitude than we give him, and this may be especially true in the realm of the growth of knowledge.

#### D. God the Father and Practical Wisdom

“When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way. Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick. Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it. All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.” (Isaiah 28:24–29) Isaiah is describing the farming techniques used in his country from around 700 B.C. It was the kind of practical wisdom built by trial and error and passed on from one generation to the next in the family and in the community. To be a good and successful farmer, one had to learn these things from one’s father, uncles, and neighbors. And Isaiah adds the surprising comment about such a wise and successful farmer, “His God instructs him and teaches him the right way.” Isaiah clearly saw such practical wisdom as coming from God, even though it might be learned through trial and error, and passed on within the community. God is the ultimate source of the practical wis-

dom which people need to live in his creation. God is the ultimate source of true practical wisdom, even when that wisdom is learned through the ordinary means of practice, trial and error, and listening to one's family and community.

The Bible strongly exhorts people to pursue and seek wisdom. "Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you." (Proverbs 4:5–6) This wisdom may be about farming techniques, about relationships, about avoiding adultery and other sins, about fearing God, about consistent work, about child raising, or about controlling one's tongue. This wisdom may come to us through various means: tradition, personal observation and experience, the Scriptures, or even the sayings of various peoples. Such wisdom tends to make life flourish, and people are so strongly urged, really commanded, to seek wisdom, because God the Creator is the source of this wisdom. Believers have generally recognized that there is also the problem of unbelief leading to false claims to wisdom. The command to seek wisdom must be understood in light of a warning like that given by the apostle Paul: "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due the hardening of their hearts." (Ephesians 4:17–18) There are false claims to wisdom that arise from darkened hearts, and these false claims must be avoided. But if we believe in God the Father, we will recognize that he is the source of practical wisdom, and that will lead us to seek such wisdom energetically.

## E. God the Father and Creational Revelation

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." (Psalm 19:1–2) Everything that people make, whether building, chairs, paintings, or books, is a statement from those people that tells us something about those people. There is a much stronger sense in which God's creation tells us about him: God has not only spoken by means of what he has made; he is currently speaking through his creation. And God's message through creation is not only about his glory, majesty, and beauty. The apostle Paul wrote, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being under-

stood from what has been made.” (Romans 1:18–20) This speech of God through creation has been given different names: “natural revelation,” meaning God’s revelation through nature; “general revelation,” meaning God’s revelation that goes generally to all people everywhere; and “creational revelation,” meaning God’s self-revelation through creation. It is different from God’s special or saving revelation of himself in Christ and Scripture, which should lead to faith and to the life of the believing community, the Church. God’s creational revelation impacts each person and every community, even those people who may not want to believe or accept God’s revelation. People often suppress the truth about himself that God makes known through creation, and this suppression leads to a deep tension within the mind and heart of the unbeliever: on the one hand all that we know that is good, wise, beautiful, or just is made known by God and comes from God; on the other hand, many people do not want to acknowledge the source of all these tremendous gifts of God, leading to a deep internal tension for the unbeliever. But all who believe in “God the Father, Almighty” should believe that God is speaking through his world and is the source of all truth in this world, even though unbelief can easily cause one to reject and distort God’s general revelation.

## F. God the Father and the Moral Law

At the end of Romans 1 the apostle Paul made a startling statement. After giving a disgusting list of the sins that characterize the lives of people who reject God, he claims, “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (Romans 1:32) What is so remarkable in this statement is Paul’s claim that people know the demands of God’s law and even know that God punishes evildoers. Sin is not primarily the result of a lack of knowing right and wrong; it is a result of not wanting to do what is right. And all people have at least a substantial knowledge of God’s moral law.

The older, traditional terms for how people without the Bible came to know right and wrong were “the natural moral law” or simply “the natural law.” These terms were really abbreviations for a longer phrase, something like “God’s moral law as it is revealed through nature.” It is a part of God’s general revelation. For us to acknowledge the natural moral law is part of believing that our Father is the Creator of heaven and earth, who speaks to us through his world, which he also maintains and sustains. We should never suggest that God’s natural moral law makes his commandments in the Bible less important; after all, we

really need specific commands that confront us in our sinfulness and arouse us to repentance and faith. The natural moral law means that God's moral principles are built into human reason, emotions, and relationships so deeply that his written law finds a profound echo in our hearts and minds, making clear and specific those things we might otherwise neglect or find doubtful. It means that his written law fits our human nature and relationships in such a way that both his law written in creation and his law written in Scripture guide us in a direction that makes life flourish. It also means that people are partly prepared for the gospel; when people hear the gospel, they already have at least some experience of God's natural moral law condemning them for their sins and making them partly aware of their need for forgiveness and reconciliation. For this we can be grateful.

God's law, both in creation and in Scripture, always has multiple functions and uses in our lives. Three of these functions of God's law are especially important: 1. It confronts us with our sin, making us aware of our sinfulness; this is the theological (also called "condemning" or "converting") use of God's law. 2. God's law also tends to restrain sin, even if people do not fully acknowledge or understand it; this is the civil or political (meaning "community oriented," based on the old Greek word *polis* or community), which makes life in society possible, so that we do not usually practice a war of all against all. 3. And God's law shows us how to live lives of gratitude to God for his gifts of creation and redemption. This third use (as a guide for the life of gratitude) is only active in believers, whereas the first (theological) and second (civil) uses of the law are active in both believers and unbelievers. If people do not trust in God's forgiveness, they may often have very negative thoughts and feelings about God's law as it comes to them in creation and Scripture, but this does not mean that God's law has no role in their lives. They may be partly aware of their need for the gospel, and they are often able to be reasonably good neighbors and good citizens (practicing what used to be called "civil righteousness"), because no one can totally avoid God's law.

## G. God the Father and the Universal Questions

When God came to Adam and Eve, after they had revolted in the Garden of Eden, the first thing God did was to ask a question. In Genesis 3:8–9 we read, "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" The all-knowing God does not ask questions to gain new information; he already knew that Adam and Eve were

playing a silly game of hiding themselves in the trees. So why did he ask this question? The question was a way of starting the dialogue with Adam and Eve that would lead to a renewed relationship between them and God. This new relationship did not immediately overcome the wide ranging effects of their revolt against God; in the following story there are signs of a comprehensive alienation, meaning that there is brokenness in their relation to God, to each other, to themselves, and even to the physical world. But at least Adam and Eve were talking with God, and God made a vague but profound promise, that the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. (3:15) And the whole dialogue started with God asking a probing question that tended to point out that there was something deeply wrong within Adam and Eve.

Our Creator continues to be a question-asking God, and these questions go out to all people by means of God's general revelation. There are certain questions which seem to come to mind to people almost all over the world and in almost every time. We might call them universal questions. These questions include: What is a human being? What is wrong with the world? What is the meaning of life? Where did everything come from? What has always existed? What is death? Why do we feel guilt? How can we find forgiveness? Is there any real hope? These questions are not mere mind games; often they are the expression of the deepest anxieties which people ponder in philosophy, culture, and the religions. These questions are much like God's question to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" These questions can torment people deeply, because deep within they retain some suppressed knowledge of the Creator, whose moral law they know and whose wrath they fear. By means of these questions God would chase the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve out from their hiding places to begin an honest dialogue with God.

The answers to these deepest questions of religions, culture, and philosophy are found in the Bible; culture and human experience are the question, and the Bible provides the answers. Or we could say that life is the question and Christ is the answer. When we say we believe in "God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," we are claiming that our Father still is the question-asking God who raises questions for all people, questions that prepare the way for his answer, which is Christ, the Savior. When we and our neighbors think about ultimate questions, we should realize that these questions are raised by our Creator, so that he can give us the answers we need.



## H. God the Father and Common Grace

Jesus taught us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:44–45) Our Creator gives his rain and sun to all people, even his enemies; and in this statement of Jesus, sun and rain probably represent all those things which people need to live in this world. This means that all the good things we receive in the political, economic, social, personal, and medical realms come from our Father’s hand. Christians have often called this work of God his “common grace,” in contrast with God’s “special grace,” which is salvation in Christ. All these good gifts that make life possible and enjoyable come from God, and he deserves our continued gratitude for his good gifts that come in so many ways. Maybe we owe God an even greater debt of gratitude than did our ancestors of a century ago; God’s common grace seems to be even more bountiful and generous than it was in the past, especially for all of us within the developed world. What we must not miss is that the common grace of God is one of the ways in which God calls us to repentance and faith in his Savior, Christ the Lord. In Paul’s sermon to the unbelievers in Lystra he claimed that God “has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17) And in Romans 2:4 Paul seems to complete the thought: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?”

Rather than letting the comfort, safety, peace, and affluence of life in the developed world make us forget God, we need to remind ourselves that all these gifts come from God’s common grace. And we need to say very loudly and clearly that the bounty of God’s common grace calls all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve to repentance and faith. Life in a world of plenty should lead us to gratitude toward God, not toward thinking that God is now somehow irrelevant.

It is overwhelming to think about these works of God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. We should stand in awe and amazement, recognizing that he is worthy of all our praise and thanks. All of our actions, as well as all of our thoughts and feelings, should be part of our worship of our Heavenly Father. If we have not yet considered what it means to believe in the Creator, we must begin to let these truths overwhelm and transform our hearts and minds. Sometimes believers live almost as if they have not heard that Jesus, our Savior, is the Son of this God and Creator, and this leads to a distorted life and faith.

More amazing than our previous considerations are the tremendous truths about the relationship we can have with our Creator. On the one hand is the promise of his incredible providential care for people. Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29–31) This is what is often called God’s special providence, the promise that God does not only rule over the affairs of nations, but that he also cares for each of his people. If we trust in this promise, it will drive anxiety from our hearts.

On the other hand stands a parallel truth, that we can address this Creator God as “Abba, Father.” Paul wrote, “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’” (Galatians 4:6) This means an intimate personal relationship and encounter with the Creator as our Heavenly Father, with a full understanding of how amazing it is that the Creator of a vast and complex universe would invite us to know him so personally. But to think about this is to jump to our next thoughts, about the Son and the Holy Spirit, since it is through God the Son that we are adopted as God’s children, and through the witness of the Holy Spirit that we have the inner courage to speak to God in such intimate terms. So we must consider life in light of the second and third articles of the Creed.

## The Twofold Work of God in the World

It may be helpful to notice the way in which the Christian faith recognizes a twofold work of God in the world, the first of which is primarily the work of God the Father, the second of which is primarily the work of God the Son, both of which are made effective in human experience by the Holy Spirit.

1. There are two types of revelation. The first is God’s general revelation in creation, whereby God gives all people some awareness of himself and his power, even though some people may claim not to know God and his general revelation; there is also God’s special revelation in Christ and Holy Scripture, which gives a more complete knowledge of God and which has its center in the gospel of Christ. General revelation is primarily the work of God the Father through creation, whereas special revelation is primarily the work of Christ the Son and is very closely tied to redemption. Both types of revelation only reach their intended goals through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. There are two ways in which God gives knowledge of his moral law. The first is a general knowledge of God's law which is the gift of God to all mankind (via general revelation), even to those who reject this knowledge; there is also a much clearer and deeper knowledge of God's law which comes in Moses, the Ten Commandments, the prophets, and the rest of the Bible, and which is always connected with God's covenant of grace and redemption in Christ. Our knowledge of God's moral will, both as revealed through creation and through scripture, is always dependent on the Holy Spirit.
3. There are two types of grace from God, his first being his common grace which the Father gives to all his creatures to make life possible and to call them to repentance; the second type of grace is his special grace, that of salvation by faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Person who must take the external gift of both types of grace and make them internally effective in the inner life of people and nations.
4. There are two types of righteousness. Active civil righteousness responds to the external demand to practice civic responsibility in our various roles and situations; this righteousness is demanded of us by God the Father by means of his creation. Passive, spiritual righteousness accepts the free gift of special grace, forgiveness, and salvation in Christ. Both types of righteousness are dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit.
5. There are two types of wisdom, practical wisdom about how to live effectively in the world which God the Father has created, and spiritual wisdom, which consists in a deep knowledge and grasp of the salvation and grace we are given in Christ. Both types of wisdom are dependent on the Holy Spirit, who gives all the true wisdom possessed by all people.
6. There are two kingdoms, meaning two ways in which God rules over our lives. The first is the kingdom of God in which God sometimes remains anonymous, whereby he providentially rules over the affairs of men and nations, using the created orders and structures of his world to shape our lives, to restrain sin, and to fulfill his purposes. The second is the redeeming reign of Christ over our lives in which we consciously submit to his Word and seek to respond in faith and obedience to Christ as our Lord. Both ways in which God reigns are implemented in human decisions by means of the internal work of the Holy Spirit.

In all of these dualities just described, the first element is primarily the work of God the Father, while the second element is primarily the work of Christ, the Son. We must never forget that the Son was sent

into the world by the Father to restore, save, and recreate the creation and the creatures, which were distorted, damaged, and misdirected by sin. This means that in each of these “twos” or dualities, the second element restores, completes, and renews the first. In older Christian language, “Grace restores nature.” This requires some explanation. We can only properly understand and appreciate the Father’s general revelation through creation when we also accept special revelation in Christ and Scripture; nevertheless, that general revelation has a massive effect and influence on the lives of all people. While the general revelation of God’s law, the natural moral law, allows most people to have some true knowledge of right and wrong and to have some idea of moral responsibility, we can only fully grasp God’s moral law as it comes to us in Scripture; nevertheless, the believer’s relationship to the unbelieving world may be distorted if we forget or minimize the natural moral law. Common grace allows many people to live somewhat orderly, honorable, and peaceful lives, but without special grace in Christ, those orderly and honorable lives are empty, hopeless, and terribly misdirected, leading to a horrible end. Civil righteousness is a real possibility for many people, especially if they receive good moral formation from their parents and teachers, so that they can become good neighbors and good citizens; but that civil righteousness is without direction and deep content until it is renewed when the righteousness of faith leads people to want to glorify God in all of life; then civil righteousness is empowered and directed by spiritual righteousness.

## Dualities, Religion, and Culture

In all of the six ways previously mentioned, God the Father creates and Christ the Son redeems. The Son restores the work of the Father, and both actions are made effective in human experience by the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that one of the differences between Christianity and most varieties of Islam is that Islam does not normally recognize these six dualities. The differences between Christianity and Islam are not only on the level of claiming to have different special revelations, different paths to salvation, differences on the possibility of certainty of salvation, and differences on many particular ethical questions. It is very difficult for most varieties of Islam to recognize such things as general revelation, common grace, God-given civil righteousness, a God-given natural moral law, or God-given practical wisdom among unbelievers. For this reason Muslims often want to derive their thinking and action for all of life, culture, and government directly from their religious law, the Sharia. In contrast, Christians should recognize a way in which God

is directly working in his creation, even if God sometimes remains partly anonymous or hidden because people suppress their awareness of God, and even if there is little or no direct influence of the Bible on some particular group of people.

Christians have not always been as clear as we should have been in our teaching about the twofold work of God in the world: sometimes Christians have denied these dualities in a confused desire to be faithful to Christ, while at other times other Christians have talked as if special revelation, saving grace, and spiritual righteousness are unimportant. But in spite of these mistakes, the distinction between the common and special works of God, which recognizes the specificity but unity of the work of the three Persons of the Trinity, has been a very important factor in the shape of life and culture in the western world. This idea is behind such important cultural/legal practices as the freedom of religion and the separation (without hostility) between church and state. This duality means that Christians have felt free to accept cultural gifts (such as education, government, technology, medicine, and law) from our culture, criticize our culture, and contribute to our culture, without demanding that our biblical faith be imposed on the culture as a condition of our culture's legitimacy. This is very different from most varieties of Islam, which want a culture and government to be somehow Islamic before they can recognize it as legitimate.

In Romans 13:1 Paul wrote, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." It is noteworthy that many of the authorities which Paul encountered, especially the Roman authorities, were not somehow "Christian" authorities. The Roman Empire and Emperor did not recognize the God of the Bible, and most local Roman governors and local rulers were not personally Christians. Nevertheless, Paul says they were established by God. This important biblical claim alternately assumes or implies most of the dualities mentioned here.

## Dualities and Dualisms

To avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to contrast the proper dualities of the Christian faith with several varieties of dualism which have often disturbed the faith of believers. At least four or five varieties of dualism have caused problems for believers during the last twenty centuries, and most of these beliefs come back repeatedly. These varieties of dualism are worth describing.

1. Zoroastrian dualism of the ancient world thought there are two powers of about equal power, one good and one evil. The world was seen

as a conflict between these two powers, and evil actions by people may not really be our responsibility, because such actions may be under the power of the evil deity. There were echoes of this type of dualism in the beliefs of Marcion, which were described in a previous chapter. Though Christians believe in a devil or Satan, he is never described as even remotely comparable in power to God, since God is the Creator of all, including Satan. Christians traditionally describe Satan as a chief angel who fell into pride, which shows that Satan is incomparably less than God in every respect. A Zoroastrian type of dualism should be totally rejected by Christians.

2. Hellenistic dualism, also common in the ancient world, taught that only invisible spiritual entities are real and good, while the material, physical realm is either not fully real or not fully good. There were strong influences of this belief system in Gnosticism, and this idea tends to come back repeatedly throughout history. As mentioned above, it is completely the opposite of the biblical teaching about the goodness and reality of creation.
3. Medieval nature/grace dualism is somewhat like Hellenistic dualism but it is partly adapted to central Christian beliefs. The physical realm of “nature” is seen as real, but it may not be very important to God and it may not be very good. According to this way of thinking, God is mostly interested in the unseen realm of grace, which is somehow detached from the world of nature, and the Christian life does not really have much to do with everyday life. Believers may be urged to ascend from the world of nature to a higher realm of grace. This type of dualism recurs in Christian circles throughout history. It is overcome once we see that God is very interested in his good creation, that God is very active in his good creation (by means of general revelation and providence), that Jesus became a real man with a real soul and body, and that salvation means the restoration of all of God’s creation.
4. The modern and postmodern public/private dualism says that faith or religion is a private and personal matter that has little or nothing to do with important public matters such as education, law, government, medicine, and business. This way of thinking suggests that faith may be privately interesting but it is publicly irrelevant, since faith is irrational and public life must be strictly rational. This way of thinking is really an attack on core Christian beliefs which has prompted numerous Christian thinkers to write about both the rational coherence of the Christian faith and the significance of the biblical message for all the areas of public life. A proper understanding of the proper dualities of the Christian faith helps us see that God is extensively involved in all the important areas of public life, even if some people

refuse to recognize God's role in such things as practical wisdom or civic righteousness.

5. There is also a type of dualism which is really a special variety of the public/private dualism. This says that natural science tells us the full truth about the physical world while faith tells us something about our subjective world of feelings, hopes, values, and meaning. This removes faith and religion from the realm of truth, while it also tends to describe the physical world as a vast evolving machine without any concern for our hopes, fears, and joys. This way of talking assumes atheism but allows simple believers to remain in their stupidity if it makes them happy. Religion may be seen as less harmful than drugs if that is what it takes to help people find irrational meaning and hope. As soon as we see that God is the Creator and Ground of all being and all truth, we will react in horror to this type of dualism.

Many Christians will find a little of one or more of these types of dualism in their hearts and minds. One of the steps toward overcoming the various dualisms is to learn to fully understand and appreciate the proper dualities of the Christian faith. All of the dualities arise from the difference between the work of the Father and that of the Son, but the connections between both parts of the proper dualities become clear when we see that Jesus, the Christ, came to restore the creation of his Father and ours. The proper dualities of the Christian faith are the opposite of the various dualisms which are contrary to the biblical message.

## Study Questions on the First Article of the Creed

1. Identify themes and topics in this chapter that were new to you. Read those sections again and pay special notice to the biblical references. How should your life be different if you understand and practice these parts of believing in "God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?"
2. How do you think and feel about yourself? How do you think and feel about other people? Are your thoughts and feelings proper in light of creation in the image of God? Read all of Psalm 8. How would our personal lives and our life in society be different if we believed this and also acted on this belief?
3. Read Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Do you think it is better to talk about one "cultural mandate," or is it better to talk about multiple divine mandates which we implement in society? How will our lives be different if we begin to see our activities in family, work, and society as

ways of serving God? Why might people not want to recognize that God calls us to serve him in all areas of life?

4. The first time I read and understood Isaiah 28:24–29, I was rather surprised. I simply never considered the possibility that God gives practical wisdom. Why was that surprising to me? What was lacking in my understanding of the faith? How would our lives be different if we are strongly convinced that God is the source of practical wisdom?
5. Read Romans 1:18–32. What will be similar and what will be different about what believers and unbelievers know about right and wrong? Why will there be these similarities and differences?
6. If God is the one who asks universal, ultimate questions as part of his general revelation, how do those questions relate to the biblical message? How might this help you in talking about your faith with neighbors who do not yet believe in the Triune God?
7. The Bible talks about God's common grace both as an example for us to follow and also as a way in which God calls people to repentance and faith. How can we follow God's example in how we relate to neighbors who do not believe?
8. Read Matthew 10:29–31. How should this truth affect you?
9. Read Galatians 4:6. Have you experienced this? If not, what steps should you take to begin to know God as your Father?



## 2 Life in Light of the Second Article of the Creed

We should ask ourselves another strange question: how would our lives be different if we did not believe in the second article of the Christian creed? How would life be different if we believed only in the Almighty Father and the Holy Spirit but did not believe that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity, God in the flesh? At first it might seem difficult to imagine that any Christians would not believe in the Person and work of Christ, but this has happened repeatedly and probably still happens. When people stop believing that Jesus is God in the flesh, who became a man for our salvation, God is usually viewed as disconnected from history and uninterested in any vital human needs. A good example is seen in Deism, where God is described as a Designer or Watchmaker who retired after making the world. Deism was probably not only a historical movement of the eighteenth century; it is probably a recurring tendency among people on the fringe of the Christian movement; Deism reappears whenever we forget that God became flesh for us and for our salvation. Whenever Deism reappears in our mind or hearts, the believer is left without any hope and thinks he needs to save himself since there is no divine Savior.

One of the ultimate, universal questions which people consider is “Who will solve the world’s problems, and how will he do it?” When people do not believe in Jesus, someone will always suggest another savior. Plato looked for a philosopher/king who could lead society into a just republic. Marx thought that the proletariat would be the savior and bring in the socialist revolution. In a less defined manner, many people think progress, technology, or good government will solve the world’s deepest problems. But Christians confess that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the Savior who will ultimately bring salvation. When people begin to more fully understand the Second Person of the Trinity, they also begin to see much about God’s undeserved special grace and God’s intervention in history; he came to save us in the midst of our great needs. No human person or movement or group of people can bring salvation. God has provided a Savior, and that Savior is the Second Person of the Trinity. This part of the Christian faith then leads to some distinctive elements in the complete Christian life.

Belief in the Second Person of the Trinity is framed by two great miracles, the incarnation and the resurrection.<sup>15</sup> The incarnation means that

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<sup>15</sup> By this way of talking I am suggesting that these two miracles are of greater importance than some other miracles mentioned in the Bible, since the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are crucial works of God in the salvation of all his people, and these two miracles are so closely tied to our understanding of God as a Trinity. We should not feel

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In the Apostles’ Creed we say Jesus “was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.” After much thought, discussion and study of Scripture, the early church concluded that Jesus is “at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin.”<sup>16</sup> The early church then emphasized that the purpose of the incarnation, the reason the eternal Son of God took on a fully human nature is “for us and for our salvation.” The incarnation was an essential step in the work of God for our salvation and redemption.

The second great miracle which frames belief in the Second Person of the Trinity is the resurrection. Jesus did not stay in the tomb; he rose from the grave. And his resurrection was not just a strange event in ancient history. As the apostle Paul saw it, Jesus was “declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.” (Romans 1:4) Further, he “was raised to life for our justification.” (Romans 4:25) The second great miracle related to the Second Person of the Trinity confirms who Jesus is, the fully human Son of God, and also is one of the central events at the basis of our justification and salvation. Therefore Paul could rejoice: “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:20) Therefore, “Death has been swallowed up in victory!” (1 Corinthians 15:54)

## Truth and the Second Article of the Faith

If the second article of the Christian creed is framed by the two great miracles of the incarnation and the resurrection, believers should clearly face the fact that our faith is false if these miracles did not really occur. If the incarnation did not occur, if Jesus was not truly God and Man in one Person with two natures, then there is no true Christian gospel, no true Christian faith, and anyone who believes in Christ is simply deluded. Something similar must be said about the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus did not really rise from the grave with a real physical (though trans-

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uncertain about the truth of these two great miracles of our faith; there are good reasons to think both are true truth. There is strong evidence for the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, and there are good reasons to think that Jesus really was and is the Son of God, since the other hypotheses about who Jesus was lack any coherence.

<sup>16</sup> These words come from the Creed of Chalcedon, 451 A.D. The entire text of the creed is found in any good book of readings on the history of early Christianity.

formed) body, then the central Christian message is false and Christian hope is simply an illusion. Without a real incarnation and a real resurrection, the cross of Christ is simply one more tragic death in ancient history which has no particular power or meaning for us today.

This consideration pushes us to face the question of truth: Did these events truly occur, and how can we know that they occurred?

Much of what we know about our faith is known simply on the basis of trust in God's special revelation in Scripture. This is clearly true of such central claims as those made about forgiveness of sins and justification by faith, and there seems to be no other way we could possibly know these truths other than by trusting in that special revelation. Of course, the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in forming that trust within us and giving us a strong internal and direct witness to the truth of the promises on which we are basing our lives; for that we must be grateful. Yet I, for one, have sometimes spent long hours wondering if this is all truly true.

I have personally found it very helpful to know that there are very good reasons to believe that these two central miracles of the faith truly happened. These reasons merit brief mention; in fact, these reasons are strong enough that they will raise serious questions about unbelief in the incarnation and resurrection.

C. S. Lewis has pointed out that there is a very limited number of options about who Jesus really was. The most likely options are that he was either (1) a liar of tremendous abilities like those of the devil himself; (2) a self-deceived lunatic on the level of the man who thinks he is a poached egg; or (3) the Son of God, as he claimed. He cannot be just a good moral teacher, because he claimed to be the Son of God. The first option is extremely unlikely, since very few liars will go to their death in order to protect their lies, and Jesus could well have avoided crucifixion if he had simply said he was not the Son of God and not the Messiah. The second option is also very unlikely, since the teaching and actions of Jesus simply do not appear to be those of a lunatic. This makes it very likely that Jesus really was who he claimed to be: the Son of God and the Messiah.<sup>17</sup>

This little rational exercise proposed by Lewis may not seem to prove the truth of the gospel or our belief in the Second Article of the creed to the satisfaction of all people, but it does have considerable value. It shows that our belief in the incarnation is not irrational, illogical, or simply nonsense; belief in the incarnation really makes sense out of the histori-

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<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis presented these ideas in his eloquent manner in *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow and London: Collins, 1952; numerous reprints with small variations in page numbers) p. 52.

cal accounts of Jesus. And this rational exercise applies some pressure to the unbeliever who might want to say Jesus was a liar or lunatic, or simply not want to think about Jesus in any way. The argument presented by Lewis is a powerful rational testimony which can support our belief that the second article of our faith is true truth.

In recent years there have been many good books written on the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus, and many good books on evangelical apologetics will contain a chapter which summarizes these evidences.<sup>18</sup> This evidence is so strong that one must conclude that we have more evidence for the resurrection of Jesus than for many other events in history and that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for the origin of the Christian movement. The evidence showing that Jesus rose from the grave is shockingly strong. This means that our belief in the second article of the Christian creed is not pious nonsense or wishful thinking. I am very glad to know this, since it gives me much greater confidence in times of doubt. And we should train ourselves to present some of this evidence to others, to strengthen believers, to challenge or disturb people who do not yet believe in Christ, and to encourage people who are considering the Christian faith.

## A. Christ and Forgiveness

Between the two great miracles of the incarnation and resurrection stands the death of Christ on the cross. It is appropriate that the cross has become the central symbol of Christians, since by the cross God has given us salvation, redemption, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and at the same time God has called us to a life of the cross, a life of imitating Jesus. A life in light of the second article of the Christian creed is a life that fully accepts God's gift in the cross and simultaneously accepts God's call to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

On the cross Jesus died for our sins so that we may be forgiven. "He was delivered over to death for our sins." (Romans 4:25) Therefore, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

The experience of guilt can pursue us so there is no place to escape. It can feel like an enemy that would kill us; that is how I experience

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<sup>18</sup> The interested reader may want to consider Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 260–272. Nash gives information about many other good sources on this topic.

it. And though some of our guilt feelings may be false or unnecessary, the Bible shows us that some of this guilt is real; there are real evils we can do against God and other people. And sometimes our worst sins are against the people we love the most. Forgiveness means release from guilt because Jesus was punished in our place on the cross. The debt was paid by him, and since the debt has been paid, it would be unjust if God wanted us to pay again. At its very center, a true and authentic Christian faith means trust that Jesus paid the price for my sins by his death on the cross. By faith we are freed from guilt before God.

Forgiveness does not mean that all of the practical results of our sins are automatically gone. Sins have consequences. After King David had an affair with Bathsheba and arranged the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, David sought and found God's forgiveness. But Uriah was still dead, and Bathsheba was pregnant with David's child. (See 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12.) For many years the results of this series of sins plagued David and his kingdom; yet the forgiveness that David found was real. David could honestly sing, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1–2)

David received forgiveness on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, which occurred about one thousand years after David's time. This means that David did not have a very complete knowledge of how God would provide forgiveness. In contrast with David we have a tremendous advantage: we can understand the basis for forgiveness (the death and resurrection of Christ), and through the cross and resurrection we can learn much about both the justice and the love of God. Justice requires the full punishment of sin, while God's love moved him to send his Son to take that punishment in our place. If David could rejoice in God's forgiveness, we should be able to rejoice even more. To know this joy of forgiveness, we need to trust in the promise of forgiveness day by day. This is faith in the second article of the Christian creed.

## B. Christ and Justification by Faith

Very closely connected to forgiveness is justification by faith. And to make the matter more explicit and clear, believers often emphasize that justification is by faith alone, not faith plus something else. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:16, "We . . . have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law." Justification is a legal term; it refers to the act of a judge in a courtroom when he or she declares a person to be "not guilty." It means that God, the ultimate

judge, now declares the believer “not guilty.” The basis for this act of God is the death and resurrection of Christ; on the cross Jesus paid for our sins and took our guilt, so that now his goodness and righteousness can be transferred to our account before God. When God declares a believer to be “not guilty,” God is not setting aside his own rules of justice. He is declaring that justice has been done and the price of our sins has been paid; Jesus is our substitute in taking the wrath and punishment of God. Faith is the means by which God’s gift of justification comes to us. In this situation, faith means more than merely thinking that it is true information that Jesus died and rose again; faith means trusting that Jesus died and rose for me. Faith means trusting the promise of God that Jesus died for me and that by Jesus’ death and resurrection my sins are covered and forgiven forever.

By trusting God’s promise of forgiveness in Christ, I can know with confidence that I am justified before God and by God. And I do not need to do anything or bring anything to God to have this confidence. This justification happens while I am still a sinner, since the process of cleaning up my sins will take a lifetime. “Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6), and therefore I am justified while I am still ungodly. God truly wants us to begin a lifetime of repenting from sin and turning toward following in his ways, but this follows from our justification by faith alone. It does not need to come before our justification by faith. A godly and holy life is the result of faith; it is not a condition we need to have met in order to be justified. Once I am justified by faith alone, I should begin to show real gratitude and thankfulness to God. And part of this gratitude or thankfulness is a life of obedience to God. In an important sense, true faith never remains alone, since faith leads to gratitude, love, and obedience. Yet it is important to repeat over and over again that justification and salvation are by means of faith alone, not by means of anything we do, accomplish, or experience. We do not have to add keeping some law or having some particular experience in order to be sure we are fully justified before God. If we forget this central point, we will forget the heart of the gospel, the heart of what it means to believe in the Second Person of the Trinity.

### C. Christ and Our Adoption as the Children of God

“To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12) “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did

not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:1–2)

These are the exciting terms used to describe one of the tremendous gifts we receive by faith in Christ, the Son: adoption as children of God. In some ways adoption is similar to our justification, since it gives us a type of legal status or standing in relation to God, a status which is not changed by the ups and downs of our feelings, moods, or situation. But on the other hand, the gift of adoption goes far beyond what God gives us in justification. As the Judge, he could have justified and forgiven us, but kept us at a distance from himself. Many a human judge may want no further contact with a person whom he has just pronounced “not guilty.” But God did not do this. By so clearly explaining our adoption as God’s children, the Bible teaches us that God wants us to have the closest possible intimate personal access to the Father. Our Heavenly Father wants us to call out to him, “Abba,” which means something like “Daddy” or “Papa.” This is the type of language that should come to mind in our personal relationship with God.

Adam and Eve seem to have enjoyed a close, childlike relationship with God before they fell into sin. With a little godly imagination, we can think of them walking and talking with God in the Garden of Eden. But this comfortable intimacy was lost by the revolt against God, so that the status and experience of being children of God was both lost and destroyed.

Fortunately God’s character as a Father goes back farther than creation, to his eternal relationship with God the Son. He sent the Son into the world so that through the Son, by faith in the Son, believers might be united with the Son and become children of God. We are united with Christ by faith, and therefore we are adopted into a new status and relationship as children, a status based on Christ’s eternal sonship to the Father.

All human fathers fail to perfectly imitate the Heavenly Father, and that leaves some believers with difficulty appreciating what it means to be the children of God. The word Father may not quickly prompt many good thoughts or feelings for some. If that is true for you, it may help to consciously tell yourself that God is the One who defines the ideal father; fallible human fathers do not define what God is like. And deep in our souls we may have a God-given ideal of what an ideal, perfect father should be. The Holy Spirit can start with this ideal, given in creation, and begin to restore our souls so that we can fully enjoy the gift given in Christ. The Father and the Son send the Spirit into our hearts so that we can honestly and joyfully cry out, “Abba!”

## D. Christ and *Agape* Love

Once we understand the gospel of Christ, we are able to understand a distinctive word in the New Testament. This is the word *agape*. The New Testament writers knew several different words that get translated into our modern languages as “love.” Some of these words referred to romantic love, family love, love of friends and community, and love of things that are especially valuable to us. But the gospel about the work of God in Christ introduced a definition of “love” that was mostly new. This *agape* love is love for the undeserving and needy; it is a love that is mostly expressed in actions, not mere words; and this *agape* love can require deep sacrifices or costs from the person who is loving. This new definition of love was closely tied to the gospel when the apostle John wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) We should be overwhelmed with gratitude when we think that God loved and loves us with this type of *agape* love. But the life of faith does not end with knowing we are loved by God. Being loved by God is the starting point for practicing *agape* love for others. Most of the New Testament commands on the topic of love use this very challenging word *agape*.

Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34–35) A more demanding test of our discipleship is hard to imagine. Jesus gave all people the right to evaluate the authenticity of our faith and life by the presence or absence of observable love toward fellow believers. When he created people in his image, God gave people the ability to recognize authentic, true love that corresponds to the very character of God himself. Even if people have never yet seen or experienced such love, they know the real thing when they see it in action. And the type of love people have a right to expect among believers should be a reflection of God’s love for us in Christ. This requires an active, self-giving *agape* that serves the undeserving and needy. We are to be images of God’s love in action.

In an important sense this observable love must begin within the community of faith, with fellow believers. But authentic love spills over to all our neighbors, whom we are to love as ourselves. As Paul writes, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 6:10) This distinctive, observable love must begin within the believing community, but it must not stop there. *Agape* love must notice the wide-ranging needs of our neighbors and try to respond to those needs. This is the type of thinking and acting which Jesus very strongly endorsed in his teaching. In Jesus’



account of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46), Jesus both identified with people in need and described the kind of life of love he wants us to live. “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (vs. 35–36)

If we truly believe the second article of the Christian creed, we are justified by faith alone. But justifying faith does not leave us unchanged; it quickly moves into love, showing and practicing a love similar to the love we have received. This is “faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6)

## E. The Imitation of Christ

The “imitation of Christ” has been a term frequently used to describe the Christian life. This is certainly good and proper, but many times believers have not known exactly what we should mean by this slogan. Does it mean walking around Palestine, working miracles and teaching? Does it mean walking on water and casting out demons? Does it mean a life of poverty and celibacy? Answering the question “What would Jesus do?” is not so easy.

There is at least one place where the New Testament gives us some clear guidance on the topic of imitating Jesus. This is in Philippians chapter 2. We are told, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5) Then there follows one of the few quotations from a hymn in the New Testament: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6–8) We are called to imitate Jesus in a life of humility, obedience, and servanthood. I am not always sure I like this teaching. I might prefer to have others serve me, rather than becoming a servant to others. And humility stands in conflict with my sinful pride. But, like it or not, this is part of believing in the Second Person of the Trinity. The Eternal Son of God became flesh, not in the form of an earthly king but in the form of a humble servant, a Suffering Servant. This is our role model.

Once we recognize that religious self-denial is important, it becomes very important to gain a proper understanding or perspective on self-denial. This is because there have been so many tragic misunderstandings of self-denial. To gain a proper understanding, we must not forget the truths mentioned above, especially the goodness of creation and

the reality of forgiveness and justification by faith alone. At times, well-meaning believers have been very harsh in their treatment of themselves, even physically punishing themselves, as part of trying to follow Jesus. And all too often this has been part of an attempt for believers to purify themselves to earn God's favor. But this is both unnecessary and wrong if we are truly forgiven and justified by faith alone. We must never practice self-denial and servanthood to try to earn God's favor or to cleanse ourselves. This would amount to an unintended denial of the gospel. Servanthood, self-denial, and following Jesus in self-sacrificial love must be parts of our response to God's forgiveness and his freely given justification by faith alone. Once we deeply grasp the grace we have been given when we were justified and forgiven, then we should begin to experience an ability to make ourselves nothing in service to others. This is a proper imitation of Jesus.

Sometimes believers have tried to flee from society or from the physical world as part of following Jesus in the way of servanthood. This might be in the life of a solitary hermit or in a small community of self-denial. Or it might be in a less structured way. But if God is the Creator of the physical world, and if he created us to live in society in his world, then denying ourselves to follow Jesus will not mean leaving the physical and social world. Rather, we must think about denying ourselves to follow Jesus within the joys, demands, and routines of everyday life. Most of us will probably not die to serve others, though occasionally that might be the calling of some. Most of us are called to deny ourselves and follow Jesus within the everyday realm of families, jobs, education, society, public life, and the church. This is the place of self-giving love for others that replaces a self-seeking love of self. A few are given special spiritual gifts of being able to easily accept poverty or celibacy, but poverty and celibacy are not the calling of many, and all are called to sacrifice our time, pleasure, security, and wealth for the good of others. All believers are called to deny themselves and serve others within creation and society. And this motivation, if it is authentically put into practice, tends to transform our world for the glory of God.

To avoid misunderstanding, we should say that the pursuit of excellence, such an important concept today, can be a part of self denial, or the pursuit of excellence can be the opposite of self denial. The difference is our internal motivations or reasons for pursuing excellence. If I pursue excellence for the glory of God, to effectively serve other people, or to build up the body of Christ, then this pursuit of excellence can be part of my self denial. But if my pursuit of excellence is motivated primarily by my own pride, for my own glory, then this pursuit of excellence is

contrary to a godly self denial. A self-giving and self-denying love should be the motivation for a godly pursuit of excellence for the glory of an excellent God.

## F. Christ and Priorities

The person who believes in the Second Person of the Trinity should have very different priorities than the person who does not share this belief. This is because the believer is united with Christ in a deep sense. As Paul stated it, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” (Colossians 3:1–3) Our union with Christ should lead us to have very distinctive things on our minds, specifically those things which are above.

At this point we may ask ourselves, How can we think much about things above, since we really do not have very much information about heaven? Should I spend my days contemplating streets of gold? The solution is to read a bit farther, to see how Paul explains himself. The new set of priorities we should have has to do with becoming the kind of people whose character corresponds with Christ, with whom we are united. Turning our minds away from earthly things means we should “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” (Colossians 3:5) In addition he says, “Rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language.” (Colossians 3:8) In place of these earthly priorities, the heavenly priorities make a sharp contrast: “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.” (Colossians 3:12–13) The person who honestly believes in the Second Person of the Trinity will have as a priority to become the kind of person whose character corresponds with Christ. This is a lifetime challenge which requires constant attention.

## G. Christ and the Great Commission

There is one biblical command which is distinctly related to the Person of Christ and his particular authority: the so-called “Great Commission.” Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching

them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:18–20) One must notice that Christian baptism is Trinitarian, specifically mentioning each Person of the Trinity. It is natural to assume then that the teaching we are to receive and obey is also fully Trinitarian. And yet the authority on which this command is based is distinctly the authority of the Son, which was specifically given to him by the Father. This shows us something about the distinct jobs of the Father and the Son. The Father plans all things, makes all things, rules all things, and sustains all things. But it is the work of the Son of God to enter into history, become a man, live a perfect human life, die for sins, rise again, and commission his people to communicate this saving truth to all peoples and nations. The Son came into the world to bring reconciliation to people who were alienated from the Father, and now he sends his followers to proclaim this reconciliation, so that people may be reconciled to the Father, our Creator. It is the Son whose special work brings radical, restoring change into a world alienated from God.

This truth should shape our expectations related to proclaiming the gospel. We should expect the gospel which we proclaim to effectively enter into the lives of people and cultures to bring very deep changes. While the Father sustains and maintains the world, the Son enters into that world to bring life-changing reconciliation. And this central work of the Son of God is continued through the proclamation of believers. We should expect an authentic proclamation of the gospel to change lives and cultures.

## H. Christ the Judge

In the creed we also confess that “he shall come to judge the living and the dead.” This is the Christian answer to the question of how history will end. We will have to give an account of our lives before the ultimate Judge of the universe, at that time when “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10–11) In thinking and talking about the return of the Lord Jesus, it is important to maintain the proper balance. A first part of this balance is to not let ourselves get too concerned about a particular theory of how and when Jesus will come as the Judge, so that we forget the big picture, that all of us will stand before his judgment seat. It is good to consider carefully the various biblical texts that talk about the return of Christ and to try to know as much about this as we can, but it is easy for believers to get lost in the different detailed theories about how we should understand these biblical texts. Then faith turns into speculation and we can fail to

respond properly to the central proclamation of his coming. So consider the different theories about when and how Jesus will come again, but make this only a small part of our total response to the central Christian truth claim: Jesus will be the final Judge of all.

So how should people respond to hearing the truth that Jesus will return? Our response should be multifaceted; it should include fear, awe, joy, and expectation. Fear should grip the hearts of those who will not yet bow their knee before Jesus; and maybe it is a misguided fear, one that knows nothing of grace and forgiveness, that keeps some from bowing the knee before Jesus at this time. Yet real fear is proper, since God “has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31)

There is also a proper awe among believers that leads to holy living. John described this when he said, “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2–3) This godly awe easily joins with joyful expectation. As Paul wrote, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8: 18–19; 22–23)

The Judge before whom we will stand, believers know, is the same Jesus who died on the cross to pay for our sins. At the judgment I can freely confess all my sins, knowing who it is who is hearing my confession. Another way we can say almost the same thing is to say that when we were justified by faith, we received advance notice of what the Judge will say. At the time of the final judgment, I expect Jesus to confirm the justification he gave to me, a sinner, at the time when I first believed. By faith I have already received the news of my final judgment, so I can face his throne knowing his forgiveness and justification, awaiting his final redemption and restoration of my heart, soul, and body. This is joy.

Faith that understands the first article of the creed leads to understanding our world as it comes from God, which requires gratitude and service in our entire lives. Faith that responds to the second article of the creed, experiencing forgiveness and being overwhelmed by justification, leads to love, sacrifice, service, and proclamation of the grace we have received. This makes life very full and rich. And yet an honest person could easily read this and feel like an observer watching a sports event that he or she has not seen before: not only is one not a participant; one

does not really understand the game. How does one get inside? How does a normal person come to know that forgiveness is real? How do we move beyond talking about agape to experiencing and practicing it? Where does one get the motivation for service and sacrifice? How does one receive power to proclaim a life- and world-changing gospel? That leads us naturally to the third article of the creed, which confesses faith in the Holy Spirit.

## Study Questions on the Second Article of the Creed

1. Identify themes and topics from this chapter that were new to you. Reread those sections. How should your life be different if you understand and believe more fully in the Second Person of the Trinity?
2. What do the incarnation and the resurrection show us about God's relation to history? How does God use and/or overrule the normal physical laws?
3. If someone were to say that the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus are just myths created by naïve, primitive people, how would you respond?
4. What does it mean to have our sins forgiven? How should that change our thoughts, feelings, and actions? For a larger perspective, read Matthew 18:21–35. How does this text enlarge our understanding of forgiveness?
5. Why is it important to say that justification is by faith *alone*? How would our relationship with God be changed if justification were by faith plus doing something great or good? How would our relationship with God be changed if justification were by faith plus some particular type of experience? What is the joy of justification?
6. What effect should it have on us to know that we are adopted as God's children? Does it matter to you to know that this status cannot be lost? How can you begin to enjoy your status and personal relationship with God more fully?
7. Define the word agape. Describe this type of love:
  - (a) as it comes from God;
  - (b) as it should be practiced among believers;
  - (c) as it should be practiced toward the needy, unbelieving world.Why is it the "Mark of the Christian?"
8. Describe the proper imitation of Christ. How can you improve your imitation of Christ?

9. Describe Christ-like priorities. Reread Colossians 3:1–13 if necessary.
10. Christ is the Person who issued the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. Yet each Person of the Trinity is involved in the missionary expansion of the gospel. What is the role of each Person of the Trinity in missions?
11. How should we respond to knowing that Jesus is the One who will sit on the throne of judgment at the end of history?

### 3 Life in Light of the Third Article of the Creed

In the third part of our Christian confession, we say we believe in the Holy Spirit. This means that the third Person of God has a different role and job than the other two Persons of God. The Father is the Person who plans, controls, manages, and sustains all things. The Son entered into history to bring reconciling change by means of the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and all that flows from his work of redemption. But ask yourself, How would our lives be different if we did not believe in the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit? This problem clearly occurred during the time of the New Testament; in the event cited above, the apostle Paul asked the believers in Ephesus if they had heard that there is a Holy Spirit. (See Acts 19.) Paul would not have asked this question if there were not something obviously missing from the faith and life of these people. What was missing in their lives? Does the same thing happen today? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the full and rich sense of trusting in his work?

How many times the Christian church (and many of its members) has fallen into a distinct lifelessness! There is no courage, no love, no authentic care for the needy, no joy in salvation, no desire to glorify God, no burning zeal to change the world for the glory of God, no pain for the condition of those without the gospel of Christ. The church becomes either a well-ordered machine or merely the carrier of our cultural tradition. Maybe our doctrine is orthodox, or maybe our doctrine and ethics become liberal, but the life is gone from our midst. In an important sense, faith is gone from the church. At these times, the criticism of Karl Marx, that religion is the “opiate of the people,” may be true. And how deeply this damages the long-term witness of the body of Christ in the eyes of a watching world that is looking for something authentic, beautiful, and substantial! This happens when believers do not have a proper relationship with the Holy Spirit.

It is important to remember that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3) Wherever people believe in Jesus and call him Lord, the Holy Spirit is active in their lives. Faith is impossible without the work of the Spirit. Everyone who believes in Jesus has the Spirit dwelling “in” him or herself. Any type of faith that is seriously Christian (in contrast with other types of faith) is only possible because of the Holy Spirit’s work. However, just as we noted times when the faith and life of people were distorted by an insufficient grasp of the work of the Father or the Son, there are also distortions of the faith and life of Christians that come from an insufficient understanding of and trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. We receive a strong hint in this direction from the strong command of the apostle Paul, “Be filled with the Spirit.”



(Ephesians 5:18) The people to whom he is writing are some of the same people who had aroused Paul's concern years before, when he first visited them, as described in Acts 19. His command assumes that there were believers who had been still in need of the filling with the Spirit, and this included the people on whom the Holy Spirit was so dramatically poured out in the events described in Acts 19. Believers need to be repeatedly and continuously filled with the Holy Spirit, regardless of any previous dramatic works of the Spirit in their lives.

So what is the work of the Holy Spirit which we must seek, and in which we must trust? The Holy Spirit works inside of people (and groups of people) to bring powerful internal changes in our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, character, words, and actions. A good example of what the Holy Spirit does was mentioned in a previous chapter: "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (Romans 8:15–16) Here the Holy Spirit is described as working deep within our thoughts and feelings, testifying to us and to the Father about our relationship with the Father. The relationship of being adopted children is made possible by the work of Christ; forgiveness of sins and justification by faith are essential parts of the new relationship with God as adopted children. So the testimony of the Holy Spirit is a testimony that cannot be separated from the work of the Second Person of the Trinity. And yet the work of the Holy Spirit is very distinct from that of the Father and the Son. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to fully trust in all of Christ's work for us, which makes us God's children; we are enabled to cry out to our Creator in words of anxious trust, "My Father." This work of God is deeply internal without being subjective or arbitrary. The Spirit's work is inside us, bringing us the proper awareness of the Father and the Son.

The Scriptures describe many facets of the work of the Holy Spirit, most of which are immanent within people, while normally closely tied to the activities of the Father and the Son. A number of biblical examples can be helpful.

## A. The Holy Spirit and Leadership

"The LORD said to Moses, 'Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the

people so that you will not have to carry it alone.” (Numbers 11:16–17) This event shows us much about the work of the Holy Spirit. Here we see the Holy Spirit working within these seventy elders of God’s people, to enable them to fulfill their very great responsibilities. (They had to transform two or three million former slaves into a godly and orderly nation while traveling in the wilderness.) This internal empowering by the Spirit is closely associated with the spoken Word of God, which came through Moses, and it was also closely associated with their public offices and official roles of governing God’s people. They especially needed this internal empowering by the Holy Spirit because of the historical situation in which God had sovereignly placed them. God had redeemed a people for himself out of slavery in Egypt and was taking them to the Promised Land of Canaan. We should notice that the work of the Holy Spirit was very internal without being arbitrary or irrational. The Holy Spirit’s work was inseparably connected with the objective word of God through Moses, with the historical work of God in redeeming his people from Egypt, and with the duties with which these men had been publicly entrusted by the community of God’s people. The Holy Spirit worked inside the minds and hearts of these men, but that work of the Spirit was closely tied to the works of God the Father and the Son. The Father had providentially prepared the way, while the Son redeemed them from Egypt and spoke through Moses. And then the Spirit equipped these men to perform their roles effectively.

It is obvious but not trite to say that all of us who have been placed in places of responsibility should look to the Holy Spirit to work within us to equip us for leadership and service. There is no promise that the Spirit will enable us to fulfill our duties faultlessly, but there is a very strong precedent that allows us to hope that the Holy Spirit will do for us what he did for God’s people at that time. The fact that most of us live in cities, not in a wilderness, and the fact that we live in the New Testament time, not the Old Testament time, do not change the nature and work of the Holy Spirit. When we confess in the Creed that we believe in the Holy Spirit, we are encouraging each other to trust in the same Holy Spirit who empowered the elders of Israel in ancient history. In the past the Holy Spirit has equipped people for tasks which changed the future; a fully Trinitarian faith means a trust that the Holy Spirit can and will once again equip believers today to change the course of future history. More directly stated, we need to trust the Holy Spirit to work in us today to change the course of the future. But for believers, a trust in the history-changing work of the Spirit should not be separated from a deep understanding of the work of the Father and the Son. The Spirit will equip us for the work and mission given by the Father and the Son.

## B. The Common Working of the Holy Spirit

“This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. . . . I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free.” (Isaiah 45:1–5; 13) This is a remarkable description of the work of the Holy Spirit. Cyrus was a pagan king of a largely pagan empire who did not acknowledge the God of the Bible. Yet he is described as being specially anointed by God, the Holy Spirit, for a history-changing task. When he is described as “anointed,” this is the same terminology used to describe the anointing of priests and kings throughout the Old Testament. This word means Messiah, which is simply the Hebrew term for “anointed one.” In the Greek language of the New Testament this title is “Christ.” Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit to enable him to fulfill his tasks as Prophet, Priest, and King. The same Spirit equipped those anointed in the Old Testament to lead the people of God. But in shocking language Isaiah says that God anointed Cyrus with the Holy Spirit to equip him for a special task. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit to enable him to set a remnant of God people free from exile in Babylon and send them back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. It was through Cyrus that God fulfilled the promise that some of God’s people would return from the exile, and it was through Cyrus that God answered the moving prayers of Daniel on behalf of his people.

This is what Christians have often called the “common” work of the Holy Spirit. The “special” work of the Holy Spirit is immediately tied to God’s special work of salvation in Christ. In his special work, the Holy Spirit brings people to faith and builds them up in faith and obedience, while also equipping them for God’s purposes in the world. The common work of the Holy Spirit is the work of the Spirit in people who are not believers. It is part of how God rules over the affairs of peoples and nations, and it is closely tied to his providential care for his people. We should give thanks to God for the common work of his Spirit which has enabled men and women to be leaders in all sorts of ways that have truly served human well-being. Discoveries in medicine, science, and technol-

ogy which have contributed to the overall human good were not merely human discoveries; the Spirit of God with which Cyrus was anointed is still at work. Artistic beauty in music, sculpture, painting, fashion and architecture is somehow inspired by the same Spirit who brooded over the face of the earth and gave beauty to God's creation. Leaders who have helped to bring peace and justice in the world would not have been able to fulfill these roles without God's Spirit, even if those people, like Cyrus, did not acknowledge God and may have been motivated by selfish pride, arrogance, or even hatred. God's Spirit can steer the actions of people whose motives are far from pure. We do not always properly give thanks for this work of God's Spirit in the world. When we do not recognize this work of God, we falsely imagine our world to be independent of God, which would be insulting to God. A fully Trinitarian faith will recognize the workings of the Holy Spirit outside and beyond the community of faith. We must never forget that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17), even when those gifts come to us through the discoveries and accomplishments of people who do not recognize God.

### C. The Holy Spirit and Creativity

"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you.'" (Exodus 31:1–6) In this instance, the Holy Spirit specially equipped these men with gifts in the realm of art and architecture to be used in the public worship of God. It was God's desire that the people of Israel would build a very ornate and artistic tabernacle for their sacrifices and other parts of their worship. Very few people had the developed technical abilities required to do the fine work needed in the project. And not only were these people mentioned by name; their abilities are specially described as given by the Holy Spirit. Since these people had, presumably, already been doing this type of work for the wealthier families in Israel, their abilities were probably already recognized. This would probably indicate that the special gifts given by the Holy Spirit were given some time before the work on the Tabernacle began. And it seems likely that the process by which such gifts were given by the Holy Spirit included the normal process of learning and practice.

Surely we must conclude that God is deeply interested in matters like art, music, architecture, and beauty. And we should also conclude that the Holy Spirit, who is the unchanging God, can be expected to give similar gifts today. Art, music, and architecture have often flourished among believers, for the glory of God and the comfort and enjoyment of believers. Such gifts of God should be received with gratitude and then cultivated, both to serve God in the everyday realm and for public worship.

#### D. The Holy Spirit and the New Life

In Genesis 2:7 we are told that “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” In the Hebrew language, the words for “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit” are all from the same group of words. Human life was and is a distinct gift of the Spirit as the Spirit proceeds out from the Father and breathes life into people made in the image of God. Sin wrought destruction and brought us into a living death, so that we are born alienated from God, each other, and ourselves. But the Holy Spirit, who gave human life at the beginning, has not stopped his life-giving work. The ancient prophet Ezekiel was given a vision in which the human predicament is described as a valley of dead, dry bones. He said that the Holy Spirit “led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”’” (Ezekiel 37:2–6)

Jesus picked up this theme when Nicodemus came to him at night with some questions. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’ ‘How can a man be born again when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.”’” (John 3:3–7)

Without the renewing work of the life-giving Holy Spirit, our lives are like a valley of dry bones, a living death. But the good news was already given to Ezekiel: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be

clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:25–27) The Holy Spirit comes on people and enables them to believe, repent, and begin a new life before God. This is what is often called the new birth. Just as the Holy Spirit gave life to Adam and Eve, he gives new life to the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. This new life starts a lifetime process of comprehensive restoration that replaces the comprehensive alienation of the state of living death. If we have tasted the new life, we should be grateful not only for this new life but also for the work of the Holy Spirit who breathed new life into our hearts. If we trust in Jesus, we can be sure the Holy Spirit has blown into our lives, and we must look to the Holy Spirit to continually and repeatedly breathe his restoring power into our lives.

## E. The Fruit of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit breathes new life into people so that they can live new lives marked by the presence of the Spirit. For this reason the New Testament talks about the “fruit of the Spirit,” distinguishing characteristics which the Spirit intends to produce in the lives of believers. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23) A moment’s thought about this list will remind us that we are commanded to do all of these things in some place or another in the Bible. We are commanded to practice love, be peaceful, show kindness, etc. And deep within we may sense that God created us to reflect his character, to be like him, by practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. So this is not just an interesting list of irrelevant information; the list of the fruit of the Spirit reminds us that we are commanded by God, created by God, and redeemed by God to be people whose lives are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. However, it is not easy. We encounter real resistance to becoming such people; and the worst resistance is not outside ourselves, in our world or in our society. The most powerful resistance to the fruit of the Spirit comes from deep within our sinful selves. We find we cannot easily practice all the fruit of the Spirit, and on a bad day we might not even want to practice the fruit of the Spirit. Have you not ever wanted to get revenge or be impatient or treat someone unkindly? For this reason believers often resort to contradictory-sounding language to describe the new and fruitful life in the Spirit. We sometimes use terms like “the impossible possibility” or “active pas-

sivity” to explain what we experience. It may be impossible to live a life marked by this fruit, but the Holy Spirit makes it possible in the same way that he blew across the dry bones of our lives and brought us to faith. In the same way, we must actively try to be loving, joyful, peaceful, etc., but then we will “passively” acknowledge, “Lord, I cannot do it on my own. I need you to work in me.” And then the miracle of the transformed life will be seen. That miracle is not without our best efforts, but it is not really because of our efforts to be new people. Maybe we should say that the Spirit-transformed life comes through and, ironically, in spite of our efforts. In a very important sense, the Spirit-transformed life is a bit of heaven breaking into our world, a world that is otherwise like a living death. For that we must pray, give thanks, and strive with all our hearts, recognizing that it is finally the Spirit who must produce this fruit in us and in our congregations.

## F. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. . . . Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7; 27–28; 14:12) It is partly by means of spiritual gifts given to believers that the Holy Spirit builds the church. Unfortunately, controversy about a small number of gifts too often distracts our attention from the very important matter of the faithful reception and use of the wide range of spiritual gifts (20 or more) mentioned in the New Testament.

A few general principles may help us to understand and use our gifts. These arise out of looking at the biblical texts about spiritual gifts, as well as from looking at the way the Holy Spirit works. All believers receive spiritual gifts, which are particular abilities which we all should use for building up the body of Christ. Each spiritual gift is truly an undeserved gift of God’s grace to be received with thanks, but each gift also becomes an area of duty or responsibility which requires that we take the initiative to properly use or implement the gifts we have received. The use of spiritual gifts is in an important way similar to producing the fruit of the

Spirit: it requires that we actively strive with all our abilities while we simultaneously look to the Holy Spirit to work through us at every step. The use of gifts requires “active passivity.”

The apostle Peter made a distinction between two categories of gifts: those of speaking and those of service. He wrote, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 4:10–11) Both gifts of service and gifts of speaking are ways in which we can administer the marvelous grace of God to other people. The gifts which we receive by grace are also tools of God’s grace.

We probably cannot and should not make a strong distinction between spiritual gifts and natural abilities. The same Holy Spirit who breathed life into us also breathed new life into us; the same Spirit who created us with natural abilities also gives us spiritual gifts. In many cases, spiritual gifts are created abilities that have been renewed, restored, and are now used for the glory of God and the strengthening of the body of Christ.

We should also not think that our spiritual gifts were all given at a particular moment in time and can never increase. Just as our natural abilities, by God’s grace and providence, grow with experience and training, so also the number and depth of our spiritual gifts may grow under the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. We have no reason to think the Holy Spirit has retired or become inactive in regard to spiritual gifts; we also must not become inactive, which would be to become unfaithful with the gifts we have received. Our burning desire should be to glorify God by means of producing the fruit of the Spirit and by means of fully using all of our gifts to build up the church and serve a needy world. Whereas people sometimes think that we should “discover our gifts” as part of our own self-realization, the biblical emphasis is always on spiritual gifts being given to us for the benefit of the whole body of Christ, that we might minister his grace to others. If we do this faithfully and energetically, the body of Christ will grow and fulfill its mission.

## G. The Power of the Holy Spirit

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) This promise of Jesus was initially fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost, so that people from many lands were united in hearing the good news of Jesus’



death and resurrection. The rushing wind and flames of fire accompanied a miracle of languages, which allowed people to hear the gospel in their own native tongue. Whereas human pride led to a separation of the peoples in the tragedy at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), the grace of God opened a new possibility, that of reconciliation with God, which would also begin to overcome the alienation of different peoples from one another. This event marked an important transition and development in God's work of redemption; by the power of the Holy Spirit God's people took on a new role, that of energetically bringing the saving message to all peoples. No longer were the people of God one nation living in partial separation from other peoples. They were empowered to change the world.

Pentecost seems to have been a one-time event in history, but the story of the early church shows that God's people needed to be repeatedly re-empowered to fulfill their mission courageously. It was not very long after Pentecost, maybe only some weeks or a few months, that the early church prayed for fresh power for their mission. And that prayer was answered. "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." (Acts 4:31) This event shows a pattern which we should expect to be repeated in the life of the church today. We should repeatedly pray for the renewed work and empowering of the Holy Spirit, and we should expect the Holy Spirit to respond, though the Spirit's sovereign response will be in a manner that pleases him, maybe not exactly what we expect. Regardless of what the Holy Spirit has previously done in our personal lives or in the lives of our churches, we should pray as the church prayed in Acts 4. We believe in the same Holy Spirit who was at work at that time.

## H. The Holy Spirit and the Word of God

There is the closest possible relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures; whenever people sever the link between the Word of God and the Spirit of God, they will seriously misunderstand both the Word and the Spirit. Peter said, "You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20–21) The image used here, that of being "carried along," is one that would have been familiar to Peter, the former fisherman. It is the way one would describe the sails of a boat being filled with the wind, so that the boat was "carried along" by the wind. Obviously Peter knew the way the Scriptures had frequently

described the Holy Spirit as the “wind” or “breath” of God. This image implies that men were internally filled by the wind of the Holy Spirit to be able to write the Bible. They were not turned into mere scribes or word processors (like I am now using); nor were they in some way working on their own, so that their writings were merely their own prophetic interpretation of the will of God. The Holy Spirit blew into their sails, meaning their minds and hearts, so that they really were the human writers while the content really was what the Spirit of God desired. Even this very text bears the imprint of Peter’s humanity, so that he uses the nautical or seagoing terminology of his previous career, but at the same time he is carried along by the Spirit to give us God’s Word in a written form. Peter was empowered by the Spirit for his distinct role in leading (and writing for) God’s people. And he recognized a similar work of God in the origin and writing of all of the Scriptures.

This is remarkably similar to Paul’s way of talking about the role of the Spirit in the origin of Scripture. He wrote to Timothy, “Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:14–17) When Paul used the term “God-breathed,” meaning breathed out by God, he was using the familiar biblical way of talking about the Holy Spirit as the “breath” or “wind” of God. We must assume that Paul knew about the breath or Spirit of God giving life to Adam and Eve in the beginning, that Paul had read about Ezekiel’s description of the Spirit blowing on the dry bones of fallen mankind, and that Paul knew what Jesus had said to Nicodemus by night. It is the same life-giving and life-restoring Spirit who blew from the mouth of God to give us the Scriptures, who gives us new life by making us wise for salvation by faith in Christ. This is what makes the Scriptures completely reliable and gives them a clear center and focus: The Holy Spirit is the breath of God that gives us the Scriptures and gives us both life and new life.

This extremely close connection between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit is seen whenever one compares the effects of the Spirit and the effects of the Word. For example, Paul wrote, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4) This describes the Scriptures as the means by which God gives his people teaching, endurance, encouragement, and hope. This is very similar to how Jesus described the work of the Holy Spirit. He said, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with

you forever – the Spirit of truth. . . . All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:16–17; 25–27) Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the means by which God gives his people teaching, endurance, encouragement, peace, and hope.

It is important for believers to actively remember this close connection between the Word and the Spirit. The Holy Spirit worked through believers to give us the Scriptures; the Holy Spirit blew on our hearts and minds so we could believe the Scripture (especially the gospel contained in the Scriptures); and the Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures to bring us teaching, encouragement, hope, endurance, and direction today. Therefore, we must expect that whenever the Holy Spirit is at work among God’s people, there will be extensive use of the Scriptures and careful attention given to the teaching of Scripture. What God has chosen to join together, Word and Spirit, we must never try to separate. The Holy Spirit testifies to the truth and importance of the Word, giving it authority and power which we encounter directly; the Word helps us know what really comes from the Holy Spirit, in contrast with mistaken claims to the work of the Spirit. If we believe in the Third Person of the Trinity, our heart, soul, mind, and strength must be guided by the Word.

## Believing in the Holy Spirit

If we find that we are living as if there is no Holy Spirit, the place to begin resolving the problem is in prayer. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to work in us repeatedly, and though we usually think of praying to the Father and/or to the Son, it is also proper for us to pray to the Holy Spirit. And it is proper to ask the Holy Spirit to help us to pray. Prayer can turn our faith in the first and second Persons of God into a fully Trinitarian faith.

So, what should be the topics of our prayer related to the Holy Spirit? A good place to start is to pray for the common working of God’s Spirit in our public leaders. Paul wrote, “I urge, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2: 1–4) Prayer is the proper expression of a discontent with the way

things are in the world, and a central part of that prayer should be that the Holy Spirit enable our public leaders to effectively promote peace, justice, and the common good.

We must also pray for the Holy Spirit's work in ourselves, and an outstanding starting point is to pray for power in being a witness to the gospel. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the church at Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit came upon the church again a few weeks later, with the same general purpose: to empower us to take the gospel to people who are without God and without hope. We must pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us individually, and we should also pray that the Holy Spirit would empower our churches to become effective witnesses for Christ.

Prayer for the Spirit to empower our witness will move us to also pray for the Spirit to enable leadership. Effective witness, and all effective work of the churches, requires a lot of initiative, which means leadership. We should pray for those who are currently in positions of official leadership in our churches, and we should also each pray that the Holy Spirit enable us to use all our gifts in whatever positions of responsibility we have received. And we should expect the Holy Spirit to give us new boldness in service.

We should pray that the Holy Spirit give new gifts of creativity to the people of God. This may lead to new gifts of artistic creativity that will glorify God, serve a needy world, and build up the church. The Spirit may also give gifts of organizational creativity that lead to new ministries, organizations, and programs. The same Holy Spirit who gifted people to build the Old Testament tabernacle and gifted the early church to find creative new ways to take the gospel to their world is still working today. Trust in the Holy Spirit.

And we should pray to be people whose lives are marked by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is the "impossible possibility." Pray that we be enabled to practice true love, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. This could make us into a different kind of people.

If we join a deep understanding of the work of all three Persons of God with a deep grasp of the relationship between God's Word and Spirit, and then earnestly pray for the work of the Holy Spirit, we will begin to demonstrate an attractive, deep, balanced, and authentic Christian faith and life. This will glorify God, be exciting for us, draw more people to faith, and have a profound impact on society. Faith in the first two Persons of God will come to completion when we fully trust in and respond to the Holy Spirit.

## Study Questions on the Third Article of the Creed

1. What happens when Christians do not trust in the Holy Spirit? Remember to be charitable to fellow Christians, but describe in general terms, if you can, believers who may not fully trust in the Spirit.
2. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in leaders of God's people? Are you called to leadership in some way? Are you looking to the Holy Spirit to help in this calling?
3. How does knowing about the common workings of the Holy Spirit influence your understanding of the events in society? What is the Holy Spirit's role in new discoveries and inventions that serve human well-being?
4. What is the relation of the Holy Spirit to creativity, art, beauty, and music? How should this change how we look at the work of creative people? How might this change your view of your own creative potential?
5. In the ancient Christian creeds the Holy Spirit is described as the One who gives life. Why is this a good way of talking and thinking? What is the relation of the Holy Spirit to the beginning of human life? What is the relation of the Holy Spirit to the beginning of the new life of faith?
6. How can we grow in producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Are you sufficiently active in pursuing the fruit of the Spirit? Are you sufficiently "passive" in pursuing the fruit of the Spirit?
7. What spiritual gifts do you think you have? What spiritual gifts would you like to have? Do you have abilities, talents, or assets which you should regard as spiritual gifts? How can you gain more spiritual gifts? Are you both active and passive in regard to your spiritual gifts?
8. Are you experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit? Are you consistently courageous in following God's calling on your life? What steps should you take to be repeatedly filled with the Holy Spirit?
9. What happens if believers separate the Word from the Spirit or the Spirit from the Word? How would this distort our trust in the Holy Spirit? How would this distort our relationship to the written Word? Use your own words to describe the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Word of God.

## 4 Responding to the Trinity

Imagine a world in which millions of evangelical believers have a well developed, fully Trinitarian faith. Imagine a world in which millions have a deep understanding of the work of each Person of God, trust fully in each Person of God, and respond actively to the work of each Person of the Deity. These people would be very different from the Body of Christ which we see today. They would not magically escape the normal evils and tragedies of accident, illness, or disaster, but there would be a visible difference. There would not be the distortions and aberrations of the Christian faith and life which drive people away from the faith and render believers ineffective in influencing our world for the glory of God. Instead, the world would see people who glorify God and enjoy him. There would be evident reconciliation with God, with each other, and with our callings in life. And there would be real courage in serving God in all of life. Such balanced, complete Christian lives would be attractive and render the biblical message much more compelling. Such deep and authentic spirituality would correlate with the needs and desires of the hearts of many people, so that more would want to embrace our faith.

The effects of a fully Trinitarian faith will not only be seen in our personal lives and in the lives of our churches. Deficiencies in the core of our belief structure profoundly distort our relationship to secular, unbelieving culture. If we have interpreted our faith inside the outline of a secular worldview, whether pre-modern, modern, or post-modern, we will become “*of the world,*” even though Jesus wants believers to be “*in the world but not of the world.*” And distortions of any of the three parts of the Christian creed can easily cause us to partly withdraw from the world, even while we may take the worst parts of our sinful world with us in our hearts. Far too often we are “*of the world*” while not effectively “*in the world,*” because of serious problems at the very core of our beliefs. In contrast, fully Trinitarian Christians should become able to stand over against unbelieving or misbelieving cultures as the critics of those cultures and the unbelieving worldviews and religions that shape those cultures. Fully Trinitarian Christians should become able to offer a complete message that answers all the deepest anxieties and questions of the unbelieving world. Fully Trinitarian Christians will develop whole ways of thinking, talking, acting, and organizing their lives which create new institutions and organizations. And fully Trinitarian Christians will contribute significantly to the secular cultures in which we live. Because a well developed Christian faith gives us a complete worldview and life system, it can truly change the world.

In contrast, many believers have an incomplete faith; they live as if God were only one or two Persons, not a full Trinity. Some seem to want

to flee from creation, forgetting that we live in our Father's world, and that this is where he wants us to live. Others minimize the work of the Son of God and do not enjoy the full benefits of knowing him as our full comfort and hope, not knowing the joy of justification and forgiveness. And far too many live as if the Holy Spirit had not been poured out on the church, so that the power of God seems lacking in their lives. These spiritual mistakes will lead to distorted, incomplete lives. These theological mistakes make us unfruitful, unattractive to unbelievers and our own children, and ineffective in relating God's truth to a secular culture.

Responding to each of the Persons of the Trinity will require a lot of thoughtfulness from us, but that is okay. Jesus taught us to love God with our minds, as well as with our heart, soul, and strength (Mark 12:30). And Paul taught us to be renewed by the transforming of our minds (Romans 12:2). This thoughtful response will be multifaceted. An important part will be trust: trust in the Father's providential care; trust in the Son's forgiving, justifying work; and trust in the Spirit's comfort and witness to the truth of the Word. Another part will be obedience: serving the Father in the realm of work and culture; imitating the Son in sacrificial love; and obeying the Spirit's call to use our gifts to build the church and extend the gospel to other people. And a certain part of responding to all three Persons of God is simply a worshipful understanding which is not possible without a fully Trinitarian faith and worldview: many people do not recognize that everyday common sense is a gift from the Father; many do not marvel at the miracle of the incarnation; many do not recognize that the Holy Spirit enables people to lead and change the course of life, even if those leaders may not recognize God. Such a worshipful Trinitarian understanding of the world should lead us to a deep awe.

## Steps toward a Trinitarian Faith and Life

### *Is There a Missing or Undeveloped Article in Our Creed?*

Probably most readers of this book can affirm the basic beliefs of the Apostles' Creed, and yet it is quite possible that one of the articles of the creed is largely lacking in our practiced faith and life. The Christian churches are made up of a wide variety of traditions, denominations, and organizations, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. Many of these weaknesses result from neglecting an important part or area of core Christian beliefs. And each Christian family (and even each individual) has its own distinct character or personality which may lead it to neglect an important portion of Christian belief, leading to distinctive distortions or weaknesses. A step toward completeness will be for each

person to attempt to assess his or her own particular faith and part of the Christian tradition; a good way to do this is to ask if an article of the creed is lacking or not sufficiently emphasized or not well understood. The doctrine of the Trinity can be a diagnostic tool to use to evaluate yourself and your part of the Christian tradition.

### *Is There a Disconnected Article in our Creed?*

Other distortions of the faith result when one of the articles of the creed is disconnected from the other articles of the creed. A few general examples may help. Some believers disconnect the Holy Spirit and his work from the Father and the Son. (I know because I have done this in my youth.) The Holy Spirit is seen as the source of power, courage, and excitement, but our responses are largely arbitrary, since the Holy Spirit and his work are not seen as closely tied to the Father (and creation) and the Son (and redemption). When we fully understand that the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son, then we will very naturally connect the Spirit's power with appropriating and communicating the redemption in the Son and serving the Father in creation. The balanced Spirit-filled life will be filled with the fruit of the Spirit while showing great power in fulfilling the cultural mandate, trusting in justification by faith alone, helping people in need, and energetically taking the gospel of Christ to other people.

Sometimes the work of the Son is partly disconnected from the work of the Father and the Spirit, rendering the Christian faith somehow limited in application. In this slightly distorted mode, believers can gladly sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," but they do not have much more to say. Of course this is a valuable starting point for faith, but then the faith is reduced to saying mostly that Jesus loves me and will take me to heaven, and we need to tell others so they can go to heaven too. This is very good, but it becomes distorting if we have nothing more to say. This good starting point of believing in the Son of God needs to be supplemented by believing in the Father and the Spirit. Once this is done, the believer will recognize that Jesus calls us to spend a lifetime serving and glorifying the Father by working in his creation, using all the power, courage, conviction, and leadership provided by the Spirit. Then we start moving toward a mature and complete faith.

A few believers are very, very serious about serving God in the realm of creation. They are enthusiastic about following God's call to glorify him by working for him in society, business, government, family, and education. They can talk at length about the importance of the cultural mandate, they may be very articulate about pursuing natural science for



the glory of God, and they are overflowing with gratitude for God's common grace. Yet they seem to know little about the joy of justification, agape love is rarely mentioned, there is no enthusiasm for missions, and they let other people worry about the fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit. One can wonder if these believers have heard that there is a Son and a Holy Spirit. Their deep and serious faith in God the Father needs to be completed by an understanding of and developed trust in the Son and the Spirit.

An important step toward completeness, balance, and beauty in our faith can begin when we consciously start trying to act as if we believed in all three Persons of the Trinity. We should ask ourselves if one article of our creed is somehow missing in our personal faith or in the teaching of the part of the Christian tradition and church in which we live. We also need to ask if, in practice, we and our churches tend to overemphasize one article of the creed in a way that is largely disconnected from the other two articles of the creed. This process can lead toward completeness and reality in our faith.

### *Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the First Article*

It is quite possible that we very seriously believe "in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," but without thinking about it, we have some beliefs that are competing for our loyalty within our own hearts and minds. It is very easy for us to have some implicit beliefs that inadvertently undermine the depth of our own faith. A correction of our beliefs may profoundly deepen our lives and our faith. I will briefly describe some ideas we might hold that can be in conflict with first-Article faith.

In recent times many people have thought that matter, energy, time, space, and information simply exist on their own, meaning that they do not come from God or are not created by God. Centuries ago, in a similar way, Plato claimed that matter and the Ideas (things like the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, along with mathematical, logical, and geometric Forms) always existed independently, and that god or the Demiurge simply took these eternally existing things and put them together to make our world. To believe any of these things robs God of his proper honor and undermines our proper respect for the first Person of the Trinity. We should say and believe that God created everything, including matter, energy, time, and space, and that the eternal ideas are really God's ideas, not something independent of God.

As previously noted, many people today tend to think that human value and dignity are based on some ability, potential, or accomplish-

ment of the individual, so that each of us needs to earn his or her rights and dignity. When believers agree with this claim, perhaps without much consideration, we have denied the first article of the creed. For when we confess that we believe in the Creator, we also are confessing that we believe that God created humans in his image, with a dignity and value that comes as a free gift from him. This biblical belief is part of the background for many legal systems that attempt to protect human rights, but this belief, both in society and in our minds, is often undermined by unbelieving ideas about human value. Trinitarian Christians should be clear in their own minds about this question.

We all grow up with the necessity of work, whether in the home or on jobs outside the home. Some find work drudgery, while others find their work exhilarating. All too often we fail to notice that this necessity of work comes from the Creator, who wants us to be active in his world and for his glory. In the same way, we very easily think that our social institutions, like businesses, schools, families, governments, hospitals, etc. are ultimately human creations, failing to notice that our Creator mandated such institutions by the very way he created us and by his commissioning, which he built into human nature. When we do this, we implicitly try to disconnect God from our lives, while we also disconnect our faith from our lives. Of course, this is an implicit denial of the work of our Creator, which must be overcome by a fully Trinitarian faith. Learning to talk about the cultural mandate and the creation orders is part of a complete Christian faith.

Many today tend to think that the careful study of creation, called “natural science,” is somehow in conflict or competition with a serious and godly faith. But such ideas should have no place among Christians, for part of believing in the first article of our faith is to believe that God created an orderly world which we can and should try to understand. Of course some want to talk about “Chance,” or “Natural Selection,” or “Survival of the Fittest” instead of believing in God’s creating and sustaining work, and that is a serious problem; some theories of evolution are attempts to replace the biblical account of creation with a different story of origins. But those who believe in the opening line of the Apostles’ Creed should be eager to carefully “read” the book of God’s Nature.

Too many people today think that right and wrong are only matters developed by society or by each culture so that we do not destroy ourselves; in this way modern and postmodern people ignore the ancient wisdom that said that right and wrong are rooted in the very nature of the universe. If Christians agree with these modern and postmodern ideas, they are accepting beliefs that are in tension with the basic Christian belief that God has written his law so deeply into human nature and human relationships that it is difficult for people to totally ignore or deny

his natural moral law. People may suppress God's moral law and all of his general revelation, but they cannot escape it. If we believe the first article of the Creed, then we should joyfully acknowledge this revelation of God's law in creation, even if it gets distorted by unbelief, even while we also rejoice in his special revelation in Scripture. If we have never thought about the revelation of God's law in creation, then we need to learn more about the biblical teaching on creation.

When people today wonder why humans normally wrestle with ultimate religious and philosophical questions, far too often the answers say something only about humans. And even some Christians may think that this constant wrestling with ultimate questions says something only about people, neglecting the way the Bible portrays God as the one who asks the really big questions. And if we neglect the way in which God asks the big questions of the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we will have an incomplete faith, not fully grasping what it means to believe in the Creator. Once we start to think about our faith in the creating Father, then we can quickly learn that he is the one who asks the ultimate questions, like he did with Adam and Eve, even if some people may use their religion or philosophy to try to hide behind a bush or tree from the face of the Living God.

It is very easy for us to confess that we believe the first article of the Creed, but at the same time to accept a number of ideas or beliefs that seem to be in contradiction to that fundamental belief. A few examples of this problem have been listed. These and other ideas or beliefs can easily compete with our Trinitarian beliefs with the result that we have a less than complete faith. It is very easy for us to accidentally accept ideas and thoughts that are in conflict with our core beliefs, without being aware that we have done so. In light of the forgiveness in Christ, and therefore without punishing ourselves too severely, we need to ask if we or our churches have accepted particular beliefs that are in conflict with our basic belief in the Creator. If this is true, it may be quite exciting for us to have our faith and life reformed or reformulated by the doctrine of the Trinity.

### *Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the Second Article*

It is quite possible that we very seriously believe in the second article of the Creed and honestly confess that we "believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord," but simultaneously hold particular beliefs that stand in tension with our core beliefs. We may hold implicit beliefs that undermine our intended belief in the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. And we do this for a very deep reason: people have a profound

tendency and need to believe in someone or something as a savior or redeemer. From the most ancient times people have performed various sacrifices, sometimes even human sacrifices, to expiate their sins, to find peace, or to make atonement with the gods, Fate, or Nature. This story is told in the various religions and mythologies. But even a rational critic of superstitious religions such as Plato did not escape the need to believe in some type of redeemer; he hoped that the ideal Philosopher/King might lead mankind to the perfect and just society. Very ironically Karl Marx, well known for despising all religion and for calling Judaism and Christianity “the opiate of the people,” placed his trust in the proletariat as the true Saviors of mankind, as the real Messiah, who would bring in a totally new society and a new type of humanity. If people do not believe in the Person and work of the second Person of the Trinity, they have a tremendously strong inclination to believe in something as a Christ substitute or an alternate means of salvation.

Unfortunately, Christians do not always give up this inclination when they come to faith in Jesus. Simultaneously with their belief in Jesus, Christians may want a second savior or think we have to do something to supplement the work of Christ on the cross. This may be some form of sacrifice or some form of worship of saints, though in the secular West it often takes more psychological forms. While they may not consciously think this is true, far too many believers feel as if they have to do something to earn God’s favor or cleanse themselves to become acceptable to God. Though it may not be intended this way, this pattern of feeling and acting easily becomes a replacement for real trust in the sufficiency of the salvation provided by Christ by his death and resurrection. We can easily trust more in our own ability to cleanse our lives or earn God’s favor than we trust in the justification, forgiveness, and adoption given as free gifts from God. Whenever we do this, we have substituted another belief in place of a proper belief in the Second Person of the Trinity. Such an implicit alternate faith can easily slip into our hearts, even while we confess the classical Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Our confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ and as our Savior requires a continually new affirmation of personal trust in the work of Jesus; otherwise we will tend to slide unthinkingly into believing something far less worthy of our trust. The human heart is filled with moral anxiety, guilt, and shame, for which we need expiation, atonement, and a Savior, so that if we do not trust in the right savior, we almost necessarily turn our trust to the wrong savior. This tendency is so strong that we need to reaffirm our trust in Christ as the real and proper Savior on a daily level. And this is what we should mean when we say we believe the second article of the Christian creed.

## *Competing Particular Beliefs in Regard to the Third Article*

Just as it is possible for believers to believe in the first and second articles of our creed while also holding some beliefs that compete for our loyalty, it is also possible to be of two minds in regard to matters related to the Holy Spirit. This problem may be harder to describe than similar problems related to the other two Persons of the Trinity, but an attempt may be worthwhile. We probably are making this mistake whenever we trust in some particular spiritual technique by itself to bring fundamental change in the core of a person, whether ourselves or someone else.

Christians normally make use of a range of activities which we call “spiritual disciplines” (Bible reading, personal and group prayer, theological study, fellowship, giving, public worship, Sabbath observance, fasting, meditation, etc.), some of which we also call “means of grace” (public preaching, sacraments, etc.), which are normally coordinated by a local church. Most of these are very good things to do, and several are commanded by God in Scripture. But a serious problem arises when we move from performing these spiritual disciplines to trusting in these spiritual disciplines, since this may easily mean we no longer trust in the Holy Spirit. Too often believers think that if they perform these spiritual disciplines in exactly the right manner they can manipulate God to do what they want Him to do. Too often we think we have to perform the spiritual disciplines in exactly the right manner to get a desired result in our own lives. Even worse, we sometimes try to use a spiritual discipline or spiritual technique to try to manipulate another person, whether a believer or unbeliever. Any of these types of actions or attitudes or misplaced trust can replace a real trust in the Holy Spirit, even while we may confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit.

### *Practical Steps*

Many readers will want some specific steps to take to move toward a more complete Trinitarian faith. Reading this book may be a good step! The next obvious step was already suggested, to use the doctrine of the Trinity as a theological diagnostic tool to evaluate ourselves and our part of the body of Christ, remembering always that believers are justified before God by faith and must be treated as God’s beloved adopted children. Some other steps we can take include making use of the classical creeds in public worship in our churches, trying to give the worshippers enough information so that they can participate in a well-informed manner. We can begin to meditate on the Apostles’ Creed and/or the Nicene Creed in our personal times of meditation. This will lead us to worship

each Person of the Trinity and to consider the work of each Person of the Trinity. And we should begin to pray to all three Persons of the Trinity. We may be inclined to pray to the Father or to Jesus, but it is also proper to pray to the Holy Spirit. It is especially good to very consciously pray to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In one sense, we pray to the Father on the basis of the work of Christ on the cross while enabled by the Holy Spirit, but in another sense we also can and should pray to all three Persons.

## The Unity and Complexity of Faith and Life

### *Beauty and Balance*

A consciously Trinitarian approach to life and faith will not tend to divide our lives into three parts. The three Persons are one God, the same in substance, even while each Person has His own distinct functions and roles. So also, there can and should be different dimensions and aspects to our lives, responding to each Person of God, while there also can be a tremendous unity to our lives, responding to the same God in all or our thoughts, feelings, actions and relationships.

It is quite possible that many of us have a mistaken blueprint in our minds which guides our thoughts, feelings, and actions; this blueprint for the mind may come from one of the various philosophies of life or cultural movements of our time and be pushing our Christian faith into a false mold. We easily accept a grid from the unbelieving world which serves as a filter for our Christian beliefs, and it easily filters out central parts of the biblical belief system. Our fallen minds gravitate in this direction. The Christian mind accepts God's revelation **as** our grid, so that all other knowledge is judged by and must pass through the grid of God's truth. The doctrine of the Trinity is truly central to the blueprint, scheme, or grid of God's truth. This doctrine must be central in our minds and therefore in our faith and life.

Let's try being Trinitarian, for the glory of God as well as for our own joy and satisfaction in our faith and life; this will also make our faith and life attractive, balanced, authentic, and complete, and therefore more attractive to our children and to the watching world.