

**The Fullness
of the Blessing
of Christ**

(Morning Sessions)

PASTORS' SCHOOL 1996

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STUDY ONE

The Everlasting Covenant

(by Deane Meatheringham)



GOD'S EVERLASTING COVENANT IS WITH HIS CREATION

The thesis of this paper is that the covenants entered into by God with his elect are reiterations of the one everlasting covenant that God has with his creation and with all humankind.

Jeremiah 33:19–26 in part says:

Thus says the Lord: 'If I have not established my covenant with the day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob, and David my servant and will not choose one of his descendants to rule over the seed of Abraham . . .'

Yahweh's covenants with David, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are founded firmly upon this primary covenant with creation. The implication is that, if we say Yahweh has rejected his people, then we would be able to say that his good purpose with the creation has also floundered. God's covenant with creation is in perpetuity, and though we may violate the covenant, bringing the curse of judgment upon the environment, this in fact is really a reinforcing of the *everlasting covenant* (Isa. 24: 4–6).

The everlasting covenant which God confirms with Noah and the future human race should not be read as the initial establishing or cutting of a covenant, but the reiteration of the covenant which God already has with the creation (Gen. 9:9–16; cf. 6:18). We take this to mean that the everlasting covenant proclaimed to Noah is a concrete revelation of an existing covenant. In his freely expressed goodness and the action of his unconditional grace, God brings Noah and his sons into the knowledge of his covenant. The God who plans the goal of creation will not be deterred from his purpose. God's grace in redeeming Man involves nothing less than the ultimate renewal of the whole creation. The new beginning, which follows the Flood, is also a reiteration of the *blessings* bestowed by God on the creation (Gen. 8:22 – 9:1).

THE EVERLASTING COVENANT GUARANTEES THE BLESSINGS OF CREATION

The blessing of the sea creatures and the birds in Genesis 1:20–22 has to do with their being fruitful and multiplying and filling the sea and the earth. Not only does this counter the theory of the survival of the fittest, but it also means that by God’s investment of himself the purposes of creation will be fulfilled. The blessing of the animals may be for their final participation in the new creation.

In his blessing God reveals his will with the promise to fulfil it. The blessing itself is the gift of God’s own generosity and empowerment wherein his Word and action are the one. God’s blessing is a Word charged with power where God causes the effect to fall upon those whom he blesses. God’s blessing of the creation is a given event which is and which stands.

In this way God blesses Man, created in his image as male and female (Gen. 1:27–28). Again this is for the purpose of fruitfully participating in the goal of God. In Matthew 19:4–6, Jesus links the creational blessing of Man by God with Genesis 2:23–24, showing that God’s blessing is upon the one-flesh union of husband and wife. This means that the blessing of God remains in force upon creation and marriage. It remains on the marriage covenant (Mal. 2:13–16), despite all the attacks we make upon it and no matter how hard we may work to sabotage it.

WHEN WE COME TO THE BLESSING OF THE SABBATH WE SEE THE GOAL OF GOD’S COVENANT WITH CREATION

Genesis 2:1–3 says that God *finished* or completed his work of creation by resting. As creation is *very good* (Gen. 1:31), God did not need to provide further creations, and there is no place for Man to complete what was unfinished.

The divine rest on the seventh day is the goal of creation, at the beginning of creation. Barth puts it in these beautiful terms:

Before this cosmos, established but also delimited by His will, and finally and supremely before the man of this cosmos, the work of the sixth day, God stood on the seventh day openly “relaxed” (Ex. 31:7), celebrating joyfully and freely as the One who was from eternity and is through Himself and will be in all eternity. He now mounted the throne from which He willed to act towards and in what He had created, to lead creation to the goal for which He had created it.¹

God’s rest on the seventh day was not inactivity. Rather *it was an event within the history of Man*. It is the foundation of covenant history in which God and created Man share. From this point history unfolds and the basic decision, that God shall be God and Man shall be Man together, has been made.

The goal of creation is not only rest at the beginning of creation, but rest is its ultimate end. The rest of God is the starting point of all that follows, and all the events of history point to the last event which is the eternal rest of God (Heb. 3 – 4; Rev. 14:13). This is the blessing of the Sabbath.

Israel was redeemed from the tyranny of the gods which make Man work without rest, and was given the Sabbath as a perpetual sign of the everlasting covenant (Exod. 31:16–17). God’s people, in keeping the covenant sign of the Sabbath, are commanded

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt 4 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1970), p. 51.

to rest with God, imitating his action and celebrating in joy and freedom. It is significant to note that the Sabbath is kept by nations outside of Israel (Isa. 56:6–8).

**THE LATER, PROGRESSIVE COVENANTS ARE REALLY
REAFFIRMATIONS OF THE ONE COVENANT OF GOD
WITH CREATION**

As we have seen, after the Flood, God in his unconditional grace reiterated his covenant with Noah, his descendants and the creation.

God's covenant with Abraham is everlasting:

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. And I will give to you . . . all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession (Gen. 17:7–8, cf. 13, 19; 48:4).

The blessing given by God is for being fruitful and multiplying. It encompasses the whole of humanity as well as the domain in which men will live. The promise is rest in the land which God would give as an inheritance. But it expands to being the inheritance of the world, the final city and dwelling of God, and Eden restored. It is the whole redeemed world in its final form (Gen. 12:1–3; Rom. 4:13; Heb. 11:8–16). In believing the promise of God, Abraham was assured of the future through the receiving of future justification (an anticipation of the rest of God), now, through faith.

The salvation of Abraham's descendants from the slavery of Egypt is the progressive action of Yahweh in fulfilling his promise to Abraham. But it is still both the narrowing and the expansion of the creation covenant determined to sanctify a sinful world. The covenant with Israel at Sinai is a summons for God's people to keep 'my covenant', which has been unilaterally set up to give specifications for the relationship and vocation which God has for his people. *The Sinai covenant is the development of an already existing relationship* (Exod. 2:24f.; 3:6; 19:1–6). The giving of the law by God to his people was really for their ongoing life of holiness as Yahweh's sanctified people. Israel was the sanctuary of the holy God and in the law they were blessed with the gift and the pattern of true worship. The land of Canaan was to be the land flowing with milk and honey, an Eden, a place where they would enjoy rest from their enemies, and the rest of God. Their vocation was to be a sanctified nation of royal priests amongst all the nations (Exod. 19:5–6). *Israel was blessed by God and would realise this blessing through covenant obedience* (Deut. 2:7; 7:12–16). It was in this relationship that God ordained the Aaronic priesthood to continue to put the blessing of God's Name upon Israel in order to keep them up to the blessing which they had in the covenant as a sanctified community (Num. 6:22–27; Lev. 9:23). The covenant with Israel and the priesthood is everlasting, pointing to God's actualised dwelling with men, and humanity's participation in God in the renewed creation (I Chron. 16:14–18; Lev. 24:8; 16:34; Exod. 40:15; Num. 25:13; Isa. 54:10; 25:6–9).

God's covenant with David is everlasting. In II Samuel 23:5, David says, ' . . . he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure' (cf. II Chron. 7:18; Isa. 55:3; Ps. 132:11–12; 89:3–4). The primary narrative is found in II Samuel 7:8–17, which includes the promise of God to make sure his calling of David, to secure Israel in the land, to give them rest, and that from David's descendants would come an everlasting king. Jeremiah 33:19–26 says that this covenant is as sure as God's covenant with creation, and is in fact the outworking of the one everlasting

covenant. What we see is that the promise of a king is linked with the kingdom of God, which is the expansion of the kingdom of Eden. Because Yahweh's love will not depart from David's son, it will not depart from us, but more importantly David says that *this* covenant is *the law for man* (II Sam. 7:19, where the marginal reading is well attested). This refers to the content of the promise made to Abraham, Israel and David to be a blessing to the nations. The law or *torah* is the plan and charter for God's kingdom, wherein the whole world will be blessed with the total content of the covenant promise.

The vehicle of Yahweh's covenant promise, Israel, hardened its heart, using the covenant to seize the inheritance for its own idolatrous goals, thus violating the obligations of the covenant. Israel enters the curse of Yahweh's judgment, which is really a reinforcing of God's faithful covenant blessing. It is now that we hear of Yahweh's intention to renew the covenant. This would be through the forgiveness of their sins and the constraint of his love for the new obedience which the covenant would effect (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–32). In Jeremiah 31:1–4, the new covenant draws support from the grace displayed to Israel in the wilderness when God's people sought rest. God's everlasting love is his *hesed* or covenant love, the faithful love, in which God is constant in his constancy, while we are constant in our inconstancy. In Jeremiah 32:40f., God says:

I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me . . . and I will plant them in this land . . .

The covenant has to do with the renewing of the land, the removal of the curse and the coming of the eternal Sabbath of God, so that the redeemed will be known to be blessed by God (Isa. 55:3, 13; 66:22–23; 61:5–9).

THE CENTRE OF THE EVERLASTING COVENANT IS JESUS CHRIST

To introduce this final, but axiomatic point, is to return to a definition of covenant explicated by Barth:

Creation is the . . . external basis of covenant . . . It prepares . . . the sphere in which the institution and history of the covenant takes place . . . the subject which is to be God's covenant partner in this history.²

The fulfilment of this covenant must be in reconciliation and regeneration. Only God can fulfil the covenant which will be an overflow of grace. God's promise 'I will be your God and you shall be my people', becomes an historical event in the person of the incarnate Son. The reason God set up the world and his office of reconciliation was because he was willing and ready to become one with his creatures in Jesus Christ. The blessing of creation is found in this true man who will be fruitful, who will multiply and who will fill up the earth. He is the promised seed of Abraham, great David's greater son, the embodiment of the law, the true worshipper, but he is also God with us in the land. Jesus Christ brings us the rest of God. In Christ, the eschatological judgment of the world removes the curse of sin, death is crucified forever, and in him humanity is raised to holy communion with the living God. As the mediator of the new

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt 1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1970), p. 97.

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covenant, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. *This is the eternal covenant* (Heb. 13:20).

Paul says:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us . . . that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13–14).

The blessing of Abraham is the creational, covenant blessing—now arrived, and complete in Christ. That blessing encapsulates the end, the goal of the covenant, the new world, the new Eden, the dwelling of God and the final Sabbath rest. This destiny does not reside in Man, but in continuity with God’s act of creation and covenant history. The blessing of Abraham is the regenerating gift of the Spirit for the new world. The end of the ages has come upon us!

Pastorally, we need to take care that we don’t view our situation like that of Albert Camus’s town of Oran in his book *The Plague*. In that quarantined concentration camp there was nothing any one could do except diagnose, and offer comfort. There was nothing to look forward to except the escape of death. The coming of the Spirit is not merely for the comfort of people whose god is not the God of history, but the great effusion of the Spirit is the pouring in of the life of the last days, the founding of the new community of God and the resurrection of the dead. The personal promise and blessing of God is nothing less than God himself.

The goal of all covenant history is God’s goal and all other history has no goal in itself apart from the one direction to which God hastens it. The Word which stands at the beginning, before any other word for the people of God, is his creational Word of covenant and blessing. It continues uninterrupted in the reconciliation of all things, and this is a description of the God who is God.

STUDY TWO

The Principle of Blessing

(by Siew Kiong Tham)



INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is a bit overwhelming. The principle of blessing would really be the sum of all the papers presented at this School rather than what is given in this one presentation. The first two papers of the monthly Monday Pastors' Study Group this year set me thinking¹ and I indicated to Geoff that I would like to pursue some of those areas in my paper. Perhaps this could be titled, 'The Reality of God's Blessings', but for lack of better wording, the title has remained.

Much of what I want to present in this paper is well summarised in the words of Peter:

His divine power has given us **everything we need for life and godliness** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may **participate in the divine nature** and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires [emphasis mine] (II Pet. 1:3).

This is indeed the summary of this paper. All that we need for life and godliness, that is, in being human and being able to relate to the Creator God, has already been given to us so that we may participate in the divine nature, that is, in the perichoretic life of the Trinity.

A SETTING IN LIFE

Some years ago, I was chairing a meeting and one of the topics for discussion was the disbursement of some money that we had. A few proposals were made and when it

¹ Among some of the thoughts in the two studies is the statement, 'The difficulty here is that many believers consider God's gifts—and giving—to be *contractual*' (G. Bingham, NCTM Monday Pastors' Study Group, 5th Feb., 1996; emphasis mine).

came to decision time, questions were raised as to the needs of the respective people and organisations. We knew the needs of some of them, but not the others. The committee thought it unfair to decide when the financial situations were not known. I raised the point that we did not need to know and we did not give just because they were needy. Need is not the primary reason for our giving. I further pointed out that we should give out of what our heart feels; that is, we give as a result of our relationship with the respective people and organisations according to what the Lord has put in our hearts to do. We do not need to obtain a copy of other people's financial statements before we give. One response from the group was that I could be furthering the interest of the rich. I replied that it would then be the responsibility of that person in that situation to act responsibly before God. In the democratic set-up that we had, I was out-voted and defeated.

TIME AND SPACE (A RECEPTACLE OR RELATIONAL NOTION)

A problem in our thinking as fallen creatures is that we need to possess and control. This has been given some impetus in Christian thinking from what was considered as the creational mandate.² This domination applies only to the non-human world and the privilege is exercised by Man as the representative of God in His creation and in ruling over them as God would.³ It is a responsibility exercised by Man.

Unfortunately this way of thinking has become the way we relate with others as God's people and the way we consider the blessings of God. The blessings become something that we can possess and control and then use for the 'self-fulfilment of our lives'. So we have come to understand them as something that we need to ask for and to possess. We come like an empty vessel waiting to be filled with God's blessings. We see God's blessings as something that we need to appropriate for ourselves and then we can use these blessings for ourselves, or in an altruistic sense for others, or in the service of God. In this utilitarian framework we happily apply Matthew 6:33⁴ in seeking the kingdom so that 'all these things' can be given to us as well.

We cannot help thinking in this way because we have been created in time and space, and we look at the blessings of God from this side of creation, as the hymn by H. F. Lyte (1793–1847) goes:

Angels, help us to adore Him;
Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon, bow down before Him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Praise Him! praise Him!
Praise with us the God of grace!
[emphasis mine]

However, God is before time. He is the creator of time. To Him all time is present. His Presence fills the universe that He has created. God has created us in time and space, yet remains the infinite Creator–God in relation to His creatures.

² Genesis 1:26: 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them **rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground"' (emphasis mine).

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (SCM Pr., London, 1963), pp. 57–58.

⁴ Matthew 6:33: 'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well'.

In his book *Space, Time and Incarnation*,⁵ T. F. Torrance, shows the development of the ‘receptacle’ notion of space in Hellenic philosophy and the way it has become incorporated into modern Protestant theology. In the decisive and formative period of the church, this ‘receptacle’ idea was rejected by the church fathers at Nicea. However, it was reintroduced by the Medievals in the West, and this has led to a deistic dualism that is now so ingrained in the fabric of Western thought.⁶

The other conception of space and time is the ‘relational notion’. This takes seriously the principle of the creation *ex nihilo* and the transcendence of God. In this notion, the ‘spatial, temporal and conceptual relations were inseparable’.⁷ There is an ‘absolute priority of God over all space and time . . . God stands in a transcendent and creative, not a spatial and temporal, relation to the creaturely world’.⁸ This relational notion was very much a part of the patristic concept of space and time during the Nicene crisis of the early church. This framework forms the background to Torrance’s book, *The Trinitarian Faith*:

Athanasius . . . drew a clear distinction between the absolute being of God and the existence of the world wholly dependent on his creative Word and Will, and thereby disentangled for the Church the twisted lines of thought between the ontological and cosmological dimensions in the Origenist and Arian ideas about God, Christ and the world.⁹

This notion provides the underlying framework for us when we come to see the blessings of God and indeed for much of our theology.

I want to refer to another excellent article by Roger Newell¹⁰ who used these two differing ways of conceiving of space and time to critique our understanding of the atonement. He developed two models from the above, the ‘subject-centred appropriation’ model and the ‘object-centred participation’ model.

In the ‘subject-centred appropriation’ model, the individual by his moralistic effort and/or sacrifice seeks to appropriate the victory of Christ to himself. This is based on the receptacle notion. This is best marketed by evangelicals in their preaching, ‘let go and let God’.¹¹ This has worked for many, and they have testimonies to go with that. But to those who struggle with this, an incredible degree of guilt is piled on them for their lack of faith. They are ‘thrown back on themselves’, as James Torrance used to say.

This approach can only reinforce the contractual outlook by the individual. He is forced to believe that the more he tries or the more he gives up, the more blessings he will receive. This will only lead to an entrenchment of the narcissistic self and much weariness.

In turning us away from focussing on our narcissistic selves, we need to think in terms of the ‘object-centred participation’ model. It takes us away from the focus on ‘my conversion’ and ‘my victory’.¹²

. . . participation in Christ rather than appropriation of Christ for my benefit repentantly redirects our focus to knowing and loving God for his sake, thereby reflecting the quality of

⁵ T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (OUP, London, 1969).

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. vi–vii.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 58ff.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1993), p. 97.

¹⁰ R. Newell, ‘Participation and Atonement’, in *Christ in Our Place* (eds T. A. Hart and D. P. Thimell), pp. 92–101.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 96.

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God's own love for us. A theology of participation integrates our faith and our works as a grateful response to the initiating faithfulness of God and makes discipleship an ongoing and natural development of faith.¹³

In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, He has brought to humanity the fullness of the Godhead and we have been given to participate in that fullness (Col. 2:9–10).¹⁴

PARTICIPATION (*koinonia*)

To participate is, as it were, to take part in something. And so, when something receives in some particular way, that which belongs to another in a general way, he is said to participate in that thing.¹⁵

The word *koinonia* is often used in relation to the sharing of wealth or property in the early church. However, Paul used this term to refer to the sharing in the life of Christ:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? (I Cor. 10:16).

'In the Gk. and Hel. world, the word *koinonia* was a term which meant the evident, unbroken fellowship between the gods and men'.¹⁶ The concept was then applied to the bond between men. It is from this usage that philosophers developed the communal ideal.¹⁷ While the New Testament used the term in relation to the fellowship within the new-found community of Christ,¹⁸ the primary usage of this term is not secular but religious. Paul's usage in I Corinthians 10:16 underlines the primary meaning of *koinonia*, a sharing in the divine life. This sharing in the divine life is made possible for us by the taking up of our human nature by Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:3).¹⁹

In our understanding of salvation, we delight in the sin offering of God's Son as something transacted outside of our lives and on our behalf, and we do not take seriously Jesus' vicarious humanity, which is the perfect response to God on our behalf. Our participation in the divine life is our participation in the vicarious humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our participation has its basis on the filial relationship of Jesus Christ to His Father. This is well summarised by J. Torrance:

The Son of God has participated in our humanity, that through the Spirit we might participate in his Sonship and communion with the Father.²⁰

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Colossians 2:9: 'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority'.

¹⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, quoted in N. D. O'Donoghue, 'Creation and Participation', in *Creation, Christ and Culture: Studies in Honour of T. F. Torrance*, ed. by R. McKinney (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1976), p. 137.

¹⁶ J. Schattenmann, 'Koinonia' in C. Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, (Paternoster, Exeter, 1975), p. 639.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 640.

¹⁸ For example, Acts 2:42: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer'.

¹⁹ Romans 8:3: 'For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man'.

²⁰ J. Torrance, 'The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 26 (1973), p. 310.

OUR LIFE OF DISCOVERY

While we reject the ‘receptacle’ notion, in our Christian growth we experience the blessings of God in increasing measure. We stand on this side of creation and we see ‘all these things’ (Matt. 6:33) that will be given to us. Yet Paul talked about ‘the full measure of the blessing of Christ’. Paul seemed to present the blessings of God as an ‘all or none’ phenomenon yet we experience them in an increasing measure. To reconcile this we need to bring in the concept of ‘discovery’.

We note first of all that the blessings of God are *in Christ*:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ** [emphasis mine] (Eph. 1:3).

In our scientific world, when a new discovery is made or a new principle enunciated, it is not that there is something new that is given to our world which was not there before. Those scientific principles were all there since the beginning of time. It is our lack of instrumentation that precludes our knowledge of such things, or sometimes our ignorance is because we have come to the physical world with the wrong questions and the wrong assumptions. Such is the case if we put a thermometer in the mouth hoping to get an answer on the pulse rate or blood pressure. We will not. It is when we interact with reality that we learn to ask the right questions and then change the assumptions that we hold.

When we hold to the ‘receptacle’ notion, we will come to see God’s blessings in a linear fashion, that is, we come to Him to obtain His blessing as an optional extra, conditional on our obedience. We impose our experience of the world we live in onto our gracious heavenly Father. God’s blessing is not something that is added on. It is all in Christ, as Paul so confidently talked of the *fullness* of the blessings.

The basis of Paul’s confidence, expressed in those two words, ‘I know’ in Romans 15:29,²¹ is not founded on his deductive objectivity. Nor is it the result of his sense of perception or verification; principles that we so often use. It is the result of the interaction or indwelling between the knower and the known. It is based on his *participation* in the life of Christ. His confidence in the blessings of Christ flows out of that participation.

We must now reject positively the ‘receptacle’ notion, which does not adequately reflect the created world that we live in, and the Creator God who resides outside of our time and space and yet has entered our world in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily,²² and all that God desires to give to us is found in Him. This is the blessing of the covenant relationship that is mediated in Christ.

This is not merely a neat theological exercise, but has relevance for us in the practical outworking of our lives. We are so often called to seek self-fulfilment and resort to all the props that will enable us to create our own reality in life. We have sometimes been conditioned to think that God merely gives us life and then we are left on our own to make it all work out. This is the rationale of our technological society. We need to go back to the covenant of creation to see that we have been given life when we did not ask for it and we have been given the fullness of the blessings in Jesus Christ

²¹ Romans 15:29: ‘I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ’.

²² Colossians 2:9: ‘For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily’ (ASV).

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when we did not ask for them. Our gracious heavenly Father has provided all these things for us, so that ‘Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these’.²³

The ‘givenness’ of life is a basic supposition of our humanity. We did not choose it or ask for it and we must accept that givenness with gratitude. We do not have absolute control over it and we must share with the rest of humanity as we live out our particular life in its limited way. It is in this participation with the rest of humanity that we discover the reality of life and living.

In our new creation in Christ, we see the ‘givenness’ of a new humanity. We did not ask for it, but have been drawn into it by God’s rich grace. We do not have absolute control over the new life as the Holy Spirit leads us to call ‘Abba, Father’. It is as we participate in the new Man, Jesus Christ, that we come to discover the reality of the rich blessings in Him.

Hans-Martin Barth, writing in *Fulfilment*,²⁴ commented on this obsession with self-fulfilment:

The success of our life is not in question, but is **already fulfilled, already assured, in advance of ourselves** . . . we do not have to ‘realize ourselves’, create our own reality and increase it, heighten it and intensify it . . .

²³ Matthew 6:29 (ASV).

²⁴ Hans-Martin Barth: *Fulfilment* (London, 1980), p. 47. Quoted in A. Torrance, ‘The Self-Relation, Narcissism and the Gospel of Grace’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 40 (1987), p. 509 (emphasis mine).

STUDY THREE

Creational Blessing

(by Andrew Klynsmith)



THE BLESSING OF THE CREATION

The creation account mentions blessing by God at three points: Genesis 1:22, 28, and 2:3.

- (a) The first occasion marks the blessing of the sea creatures and the birds, and with it is a mandate—commanded fruitfulness, multiplication and the filling of the seas and skies. All fruitfulness flows from the blessing activity of God—and not in a detached way (the blessing of the creation with fruitfulness does not operate *ex opere operato*) but in a participatory way—that is, by the investment of God Himself in the work of blessing (see Ps. 104, esp. vv. 24–30).
- (b) The second occasion marks the blessing of the man and woman. Again, with the blessing a mandate is given—commanded fruitfulness, multiplication and the filling and subduing of the earth, coupled with the man and woman's dominion over all living things. Along with this is the promised providence of God.

The link between the blessing and the mandate is essential to maintain. It tells us that blessing is purposive, and must be understood within the plan of God for eternity. Creational blessings must be understood teleologically. It tells us also that blessing is known only in obedience. It tells us that obedience is only possible in the blessing of God—that is, in His own personal investment of Himself in the lives of those who are called to serve Him. Obedience is seen best as willing participation in the plan of God's 'blessing history'.

(There is an ontological necessity to be in the flow of fruitfulness, multiplication and filling. Where that flow is dammed up by rebellion against, and refusal of, communion with the Triune God of blessing, much pain is caused in the human spirit. It means also that the ontological pressure to be fruitful, growing and filling is perverted. The resort to magic and occult powers is the attempt to be fruitful and growing outside of godly communion. In our modern age, technology and

technique are the modern forms of magic. The pressure to fill the creation is twisted into the totalitarian nature of particular cultures and approaches. Filling becomes not the subduing of creation to the worship of God, but rather to the worship of the filler.)

- (c) The third occasion marks the blessing of the completed creation on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath itself is blessed, and this seventh day begins the rest of Biblical history—it is an open-ended day, not ended by another morning. The blessing of the Sabbath is set apart from the other blessing days in the creation in that it is linked with the sanctifying (hallowing) work of God. The sanctifying or setting apart of Eden is with a view to the extension of Eden (by Man's filling and subduing of the world) to the ends of the earth. Eden is sanctified for worship and communion. The blessed mandate of the man and the woman is to lead the whole of creation into communion and worship. As steward of creation, Man is the worship leader. By bringing the earth to fullness and fruitfulness, he leads the creational worship.

THE RECIPROCAL BLESSING OF THE CREATION

All communion is perichoretic, and so the nature of blessing is perichoretic. God invests Himself in the creation by blessing, and creation then freely responds with blessing. Such blessing could never add to God, but is the action of participation in God by glad and thankful receipt of His many gifts. Hence the Psalms call for us to bless God (see esp. Ps. 103 and 104). Add to this the many ways in which we are called to worship the Lord in the Psalms. Note also, though, that often we are those who call the creation to worship. In the Apocrypha, the *Song of the Three Young Men* is a particularly strong statement of this principle.

THE CURSE

The Fall and the curse cannot be overlooked in understanding creational blessing. We cannot simply return to a state of 'original blessing' by overlooking the Fall of Man. Blessing is known only in participative, obedient communion; where there is disobedience and separation from God the curse comes into operation. The curse is God's determination that blessing can only be known in communion, and His shutting up of any possibility of blessing apart from Him.

The curse which comes because of the disobedience of Adam applies not only to Adam and Eve, but also to the creation—particularly the serpent, but to a lesser extent to the cattle and all wild animals, and to the ground. We must not speak of a fallen creation; it was humanity which 'fell'. Yet the curse applies to the creation without vitiating it. Creational worship goes on around us all the day and night—Psalm 19, Romans 1:19–21, and the worship of the living creatures in Revelation 4:6b–11 and 5:11ff.. But because the worship leader, Man, is fallen, the worship of creation is subject to futility (Rom. 8:18–25). In waiting for the sons of God to be revealed, creation waits for the liberation of its voice into full-blooded worship. The preaching of the reconciling Gospel, which brings guilty sons and daughters back to the Father's embrace through the justifying work of the Cross, does more for worship than any other act!

THE FULFILLING OF CREATIONAL BLESSING

Creational blessing is fulfilled in the incarnation, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The goal of salvation is participation in the divine nature (II Pet. 1:3, 4). This is made possible only by the assumption of humanity by Christ in His incarnation, the purifying and redeeming of that humanity in His death and resurrection, and the glorifying of that humanity in his ascension.

He also fulfils the reciprocal creational blessing by his headship of the redeemed Church. He is worship leader, who leads the worship from the right hand of God. His leadership is mediatorial, but it results in participation in the Godhead, full communion with the Father, a blessing of God which is spoken from within His bosom, where we share in the intimacy of the Son.

STUDY FOUR

The Fullness of the Blessing of Christ

(by Grant Thorpe)



‘The fullness of the blessing of Christ’ is the topic for this whole School. This study is therefore an introduction. It also deals with Paul’s certainty concerning his coming to Rome in that fullness (Rom. 15:29).

PAUL’S ANTICIPATION ABOUT COMING TO ROME

The fullness of the blessing of Christ must be an action of God. Paul’s confidence in this led to an appeal that those in Rome pray for his coming to them (Rom. 15:32).

Secondly, the fullness of the blessing in Christ would have to do with the gospel he set out in his letter. Paul expected to impart some spiritual gift, to find mutual encouragement and to reap some harvest among the Romans. But the blessing would have to arise especially through the gospel of which he was unashamed, which was the power of God and a revelation of the righteousness of God (1:11–17), and this, of course, was through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21–26).

In recounting God’s faithfulness to his promise concerning Israel, he says ‘the full number of the Gentiles’ will ‘come in’ and that ‘all Israel will be saved’ (11:25–26). It is difficult to envisage the fullness of the blessing of Christ apart from this confidence of its fulfilment. He then affirms that ‘the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (14:17). Paul concludes his argument by praying that the God of hope would ‘fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope’ (15:13). He was arranging for Gentiles who had shared in Israel’s spiritual blessings to assist them with material blessings (15:27).

Paul’s confidence in coming to Rome in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel must have anticipated the effecting of these works of God in the lives of people at Rome.

P. T. Forsyth calls preaching a sacrament—an action:

That is why I call him a sacramental man, not merely an expository, declaratory man. In a sacrament is there not something done, not merely shown, not merely recalled? It is no mere memorial. How can you have a mere memorial of one who is always living, always present, always more potent than our act of recall is, always the mover of it?¹

THE FULL SPIRITUAL BLESSING IN CHRIST IN *EPHESIANS*

Paul spelt out in the Ephesian Letter what he meant by ‘the full spiritual blessing’ of God in Christ. It included election to holiness before God, being chosen in love for adoption as sons, a free bestowal of grace in the Beloved—which would bring praise to God, redemption or forgiveness through Christ’s blood, the revealing of his purpose to unite all things in Christ, living to the praise of his glory.

Markus Barth argues for the translation of Ephesians 1:3 as ‘the full spiritual blessing’ and adds:

the interpretation has to avoid any shade of doubt that the blessing may be composite of many parts . . . If any of its many aspects or dimensions were missing, it would not only be incomplete, but distinct from the ‘blessing [given] in Christ’.²

To this may be added the content of Paul’s prayers for the people so blessed—revelation of God’s hope for us, his inheritance in us and power towards us through Christ, who is over all things.

It could then be said ‘living to the praise of his glory’ includes all the injunctions in the Ephesian Letter—for example, imparting grace, not grieving the Spirit (4:29–30), wielding the sword of the Spirit and praying in the Spirit (6:17–18).

Paul was mastered by this blessing, or rather, by the God of this blessing, and cared not that he suffered for it, and knelt in awe before the Father to pray for his readers’ reception of ‘all the fulness of God’ (3:13–19).

CONCERNING PAUL’S CONFIDENCE

Paul’s words (Rom. 14:29) suggest that the fullness of the blessing of Christ would not only accompany his service, but will also be brought by his service. As the Lord had blessed him in turning him from his wickedness (Acts 3:26), so he would expect Christ to work through him ‘to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 15:18–19).

It may be assumed that he himself would be in the fullness of the blessing of Christ—borne along by it, constrained by the love of Christ so that the wholeness of the blessing of Christ would be apparent to his hearers (cf. II Cor. 5:14–20).

From the beginning, he knew that his gospel and his apostleship were not from men but from God (Gal. 1:15–18). As he was sure that the Thessalonians had

¹ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Independent Pr., 1949) p. 55.

² Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34 (Doubleday & Co., New York, 1981), p. 78.

encountered God through his service there (I Thess. 1 and 2), so he is confident now of what would happen at Rome.

WAS THE BLESSING OCCASIONAL OR CONTINUOUS?

There is no reason given to us in the New Testament to doubt that Paul knew the fullness of the blessing of Christ from the time of his conversion. He was forgiven and received the gift of the Spirit and acted in the power of that gospel to fulfil the particular commission given to him. He argues for the consistency of his commission in Galatians.

The fullness of the blessing of Christ for Paul was in Christ himself and was valid, not by works, but by grace. The fullness of the blessing was a gift and not a reward. The question of whether Paul ever failed to live in this blessing does not need to arise. Paul himself had learned to live from within the promise of God and not to be circumscribed by the awareness of himself being a sinner.

What had grasped Paul was that there was a blessing for the creation whereby it could be fruitful and come to its goal, that this blessing had now been fully revealed and implemented in Jesus Christ. Through the Cross and Resurrection of the incarnate Son of God who is Christ, the world's sinfulness had now been fully acknowledged and judged, and the full blessing of God was in full flow for the whole creation.

This blessing was a gracious purpose for sinners—of whom Paul believed he was chief—and he knew himself to be amply equipped, by the call of God, to convey this to other sinners (I Tim. 1:12–17). He himself could come to Rome in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

The fullness of the blessing was contested. For example, Paul said ‘we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but’, he adds, ‘that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead’ (II Cor. 1:8–9). He found and taught that weakness was the appropriate context for the fullness of the blessing of Christ (II Cor. 12:9–10).

THE FULLNESS OF THE BLESSING OF CHRIST & THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT

The fullness of the blessing of Christ outlined in Ephesians, shows that it belongs to the whole church. The fullness Paul had in mind could not be other than the fullness given to every believer in the coming of the Spirit. Undoubtedly, there were gifts given to Paul as an apostle which made it appropriate for that fullness to be evidenced in particular ways. Each should serve according to the measure of faith given (Rom. 12:3).

The Spirit has come to bring the fullness of the blessing of Christ to us, but also that we may be servants of the word to others. This is the empowering to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). The whole church sought and received a renewal of this empowering when its witness was threatened (Acts 4:29–31).

LIVING AND SERVING IN THE BLESSING

We may be diverted from the truth that God has given us his Spirit, and live in less than the fullness of the blessing of Christ. That is different from saying that these gifts are

not ours. We are to be aglow with the Spirit (Rom. 12:11), and to stir up the gift given to us (II Tim. 1:5–6). When reproached for the truth we bear, we are still blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us (I Pet. 4:14).

CONCLUSION

It was not the power of Rome that fascinated Paul as he headed towards the imperial capital. He knew, and was confident in, the new life of Christ in which he now lived before the Father in the power of the Spirit. Here was the blessing enough for his life—sinner though he was; power enough for his work—weak though he was; and hope enough for the world in its darkness.

Then let us pray for one another, and for the churches, that God will give us revelation of the fullness of the blessing of Christ. In that, we shall be sure, also, of the service we are to render to God.

STUDY 5

The History of the Blessing of God

(by Dean Carter)



The search for the blessing is as contemporary as the dawn's light, which exposes the barrenness of this very day, and as old as the plaintive cry of Esau, who sought the birthright he had squandered away for a piece of bread and a bowl of stew. ' "Bless me, me also, father! And Esau lifted up his voice and wept" (Genesis 27:38).

The search for the blessing has become an addictive curse and a captivating cult for many . . .¹

The Bible speaks of the good will of God which issues in the prosperity, security and harmony known by humanity and creation. This goodwill or blessing has been called the '*hallmark of the history of salvation*'.² This paper traces the history of the Biblical concept of blessing, as the fruit and fulfilment of the comprehensive purpose of God. More than mere deliverance or distinct divine acts of intervention, blessing is the state of God's encompassing and embracing goodwill from creation to the new creation. As such it should not surprise us that Esau sought to recover what he lost, and that for others the quest for blessing has become an obsession.

In the course of our study we will cover the use of the term 'blessing' and related concepts in the Old Testament, from creation through human crises to the promised blessing to Abraham and the nations, developed through successive revelations, underpinned by the blessing of covenant wisdom, then through the New Testament, where divine blessing converges in the life and ministry of Christ, the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, to the ministry of blessing in and through the Church, to the coming of the Kingdom and the new creation. Our starting point, however, is a brief survey of the Biblical terms for 'blessing'.

¹ Ray S. Anderson, *Everything That Makes Me Happy I Learned When I Grew Up* (InterVarsity Press: 1995), pages 121-122.

² Chr. Senft, 'Blessing' in *Vocabulary of the Bible*, ed. J-J. von Allmen (Lutterworth Press: 1961), page 38.

TERMINOLOGY

Old Testament

Bárah —the Hebrew word is linked with the Ugaritic root *brk* and Akkadian word *karábu*, and means and involves endowing with beneficial power. The oldest form is a promise in the indicative: *Blessed are you!* (Gen. 26:29). While anyone is entitled to bless, some appear to have been empowered to bless others (see Josh. 6, and prophets and priests). Blessings include fertility, security and protection from enemies, good fortune and family and community wellbeing (i.e. *shalom* = peace). Blessings were conferred on family members at births, weddings, and deaths, especially with the blessing of the heir, the firstborn son.

Ashere —Hebrew *'eser*, happiness and wellbeing, *'ásar*, to pronounce happy, and *'asré*, well being to. While God is never 'happy' as such, man is the recipient of the gift of happiness. Most beatitudes are in Psalms and Wisdom literature, and are of uncertain origin or setting. Some argue that setting is covenant blessing formula seen in the Psalms, others more in terms of exhortations and sagacious sayings, others still in connection with personal greetings and congratulations.

New Testament

Eulogein and *eulogia* 68 X in NT (verbal 44 X, substantive 16 X, and as adjective 8 X). The original Greek term meant 'to use beautiful language' as in Romans 16:18 ('fair speaking': Cassirer). For other NT uses, the background may be traced through the Septuagint, which employed *eulogein* to render the Hebrew *brk*.

Makaríoi (cf. *makarismen* = beatitude) 44 X in NT, with 28 X in Matthew and Luke; 2 X in John; 3 X in Paul; 2 X in James; 2 X in I Peter; and 7 X in Revelation. Within these there is diversity of form and content. Note Luke's more eschatological setting, in distinction from Matthean wisdom-cultic setting. The likely original meaning included freedom from daily cares and worries.

The 'curse': as obverse of blessing, yet not as form of dualism. Expresses the wrath of God. *Locus classicus* is found in chapters 27 – 28 of Deuteronomy. See also curse in relation to enemies in the imprecatory Psalms, and the crucifixion (Deut. 21:23; and Gal. 3:13). See too the related term 'woe' as a negation of the beatitudes (Matt. 11:21; 26:24; 23: 13, 16).

(Claus Westermann *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*:³ the term or concept of covenant is conspicuous by its absence from the Indexes, as well as the failure to see blessing and cursing as covenant terms. Westermann traces the motif of blessing from prehistorical magic, through Israel's notion of promise, to the new confession of Jesus of Nazareth as the blesser and blessing: he thus sees

Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Fortress Press: 1978). See too *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (John Knox Press: 1982), Part II, The Blessing God and Creation, pages 85–100. Westermann suggests that:

Blessing is a working of God which is different from saving insofar as it is not experienced as the latter in individual events or in a sequence of events. It is a quiet, continuous, flowing, and unnoticed working of God which cannot be captured in moments or dates. Blessing is realized in a gradual process of growing, maturing, and fading. The Old Testament does not just report a series of events which consists of the great acts of God. The intervals are part of it. In them God gives growth and prosperity unnoticed in a quiet working, in which he lets children be born and grow up, in which he gives success in work. The saving God is also the blessing God . . . One receives from God's hand one's whole life, especially in its daily unobtrusiveness in which nothing particular happens. (See *Elements*, page 103.)

both Testaments drawing and building upon a prior motif, which is expanded and employed in community life and liturgy. Much of this paper is dependent on the insights from Westermann's works.)

BLESSING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis 12:1–3 records what the apostle Paul calls the 'gospel' (Gal. 3:8). The covenant promise of blessing made by God to Abraham provides the background to the mission of the gospel of God's kingdom to the Gentiles. The Creator, seen as the covenant God, who is concerned for the nations. Thus Genesis 12 is the hinge between Genesis 1 – 11, and the people of Israel (see Deut. 7:7–8). Abraham is a significant and central figure in the history of Israel and the nations, and through his seed (Isaac and Jesus), the destiny of the nations. We cannot underestimate the importance of this for the Scriptures, history of blessing and nature of the 'mission' of God. The divine blessing is to be mediated through Abraham (the chosen patriarch), Israel (the chosen people), and so Christ (the Elect One). After all, God created the nations, and has a purpose for them.

This section covers the use of the term 'blessing' and related concepts through the Old Testament, as a backdrop to the history of blessing, culminating in the advent of Christ and the fulfilment of the promise of God's blessing of the nations and all creation.

The Blessing of Creation

The key motif of the creative narratives was the blessing of God on the creatures of the sea and air (Gen. 1:22) and an almost parallel blessing on humanity (Gen. 1:28, with the vocational mandate). Such blessing conveyed an ability and goal — fruitfulness and the filling up of creation. This is almost immediately followed by the further blessing and sanctification of the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3), in perpetuity of the completion of creation.

In chapter 3 we read of the fall of the primal couple, and the sequel of curse (3:14ff.). The theme of judgment is carried through chapter 4, with the subversion of the family by Cain. However, the creation blessing and mandate was reiterated in 5:2, and again, after the Flood (Gen. 9:1). God continued to bless, apart from the explicit employment of the term 'blessing', as is evidenced by the promises in 3:15 (of the coming Bruiser).

A second catastrophe, with the Flood, culminates with Noah being blessed (8:17; 9:17), plus the provision for creation (8:22): God would not curse the ground, for the sake of man (cf. Gen. 3:17): God shows Himself to be guarantor of the life of all creation. There is also the promise to Noah's sons (9:27 — the blessing that God would dwell in Shem's tents, although Canaan would be cursed).

This is followed by a third crisis, with the tower of Babel as rebellious man's counter to the creational mandate to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 6:1, multiply — as per creation blessing — yet subversion of the state). God's answer is a further blessing, which would show that unity is not in human schemes and strategies but a universal covenant. To nations estranged and alienated from God and themselves, the 'God of glory appeared' (Acts 7:2) to a descendent of Shem, and gave an extra-ordinary promise of blessing.

The Promised Blessing of the Nations

Blessing and the Patriarchs

With the promise/blessing given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 (blessing 5 X), a new epoch in the history of salvation and blessing dawns. The content of the promise is, ‘I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great [reputation]’ — so that Abraham would be a blessing. Those who bless Abraham will be blessed (i.e. Melchizedek as priest of God Most High and king of Salem blessed Abram, see Gen. 14:18–20), those who curse him will be cursed — so that all nations would be blessed (cf. Noahic nations in 10:32). This promise is recited and expanded in Genesis chapters 15:7–8, 18, 17:1–8, and 22:15–18, with the promise of descendants and land.

For the patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — children were given in spite of the barrenness of patriarchs’ wives, and age of patriarchs, with each successive son a boon to nations (Isaac, 26:3–4; Jacob, 28:13–14). Jacob received a blessing by the Angel of the Lord (Gen. 32:24–32); he received a promise and blessing which echoes that of creation (Gen. 35:11). The patriarchs’ personal benefits spilled over into lives of others: so Laban from Jacob, Pharaoh by Joseph. The blessing was transmitted from father to son: *bárah* as ‘to place on the knees of’; so Isaac imparted his blessing to Jacob (27:27: cf. the stealing of the birthright from Esau), Laban as he blessed his children and grandchildren (31:55), Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s children (Gen. 48) as well as his own children (Gen. 49). Abraham believed that God was victor over death: the Lord became known to His people as the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ (cf. Mark 12:26).

At the end of the patriarchal period we note the promise of land, blessing, and there was the pledge of God’s presence: ‘I will be with you’; all such promises were founded on divine revelations. In addition to the instances of ‘blessing’, synonyms for blessing include success, prosperity and maturity. Each of the Patriarchs enjoyed remarkable success.

Genesis 1–11 provides the background for our survey of ‘history of the blessing of God’. Genesis 12:1–3 raises the possibility of renaming it as the ‘history of the gospel’. But by the end of the patriarchal era one critical question comes to the fore, ‘If the sons of Jacob (Israel) received blessing appropriate to them (Gen. 49:28b), how and when were the nations to be blessed?’ This question is answered with the Theophany before Moses.

The Blessing of Moses and the People of God

Moses as the liberator and shepherd of Israel is introduced in Exodus chapter 1, following a comment which echoes the creational mandate (Gen. 1:28; 35:11; Exod. 1:7). With the appearance of the Lord to Moses, the declaration of His name, and reassurance that He remembered the oath to the fathers (Exod. 2:24; 3:15–16; Deut. 7:7–8), Moses is commissioned to lead Israel as ‘first-born or elect son’ from slavery to freedom in the ‘promised land’, to act as a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa. 49:6) by fulfilling its role as priestly kingdom and holy nation (Exod. 19:5–6). As a unique people (Deut. 33:29), Israel is blessed by the Lord, this stressed by the Aaronic blessing of peace (Num. 6:23–27: Aaron and the Levitical priesthood serve God and bless in His name) and that of Balaam (Num. 23: this is prophetic and self-fulfilling, for Balaam cannot curse what or those whom God has blessed. Likewise, Moses was not free to bless where Pharaoh was under judgment: Exod. 12:32b).

On the threshold of entering into Canaan as the land (a new ‘Eden’: cf. the

Tabernacle as a microcosm of Eden), Moses reiterated the covenant law, its obligations, stipulations, and sanctions. Israel is reminded of the Deuteronomic principle of blessing and cursing (Deut. 27 – 28).

The Blessing of David and the ‘Charter for Humanity’

After David secured the boundaries of the land which Abraham had traversed (II Sam. 7:1), he proposed to make an appropriate palace to house the ark of the covenant, and so replace the temporary and decaying Tabernacle. In the context of a promise of rest, an heir and building of the Temple, a further step in the revelation of the divine purpose is taken. The blessing of Abraham is continued and extended in the blessing of David.

The prophetic word through Nathan provides what David recognised as ‘a law for man’ or charter for humanity.⁴ (II Sam. 7:19 within David’s prayer of 18–29 [cf. I Chron. 17:17].) Could this be a new ‘teaching’ or instruction, and what is its scope? David discerned that the scope is the fullness of the nations, or humanity at large. Here it refers to a principle by which all of the nations will be blessed. So Kaiser observes: ‘we call this *tórah* a “charter” because it is the plan and prescription for God’s kingdom whereby the whole world shall be blessed with the total content of the promise doctrine’.⁵ So, a Davidic dynasty would be involved in the ancient promise of blessing to mankind. Thus David was a prophet pointing to Christ as one of his own descendants, as the Son to enjoy and exercise everlasting dominion.

The Promise of the New Covenant

The application of the Deuteronomic blessing and curse led to the forfeiture by rebellious Israel of its place in the promised land, and its enforced return to Abraham’s point of departure — the land of the Chaldeans. The prophets of the exile exposed the infidelity of Judah and Israel (especially the pervasive idolatry, as a proscribed means for seeking blessing: see Hosea 2:8; Hag. 2:18; cf. Deut. 8:16ff.), executed the judgments of the Lord (e.g. Isa. 6), and exhorted the people with the promise of restoration and the renewal of the covenant. In Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, we read the diagnosis of Israel’s dilemma, and the aspects of the renewed covenant — forgiveness, the interiorisation of the law, the return to the land, the donation of the Spirit of holiness, the dwelling of the Lord with His people, and the revelation of the Lord’s name and power to the nations. The future glory of Israel and Zion is linked with the ministry of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 40 – 55), in anticipation of the gathering of the nations and the Edenic new creation (Isa. 65 – 66).

The Blessing of Wisdom: The Wisdom of Blessing

It would be easy to overlook — as many conservatives have, with their concentration on a redemption theology — the place of *wisdom*, both within the canon itself, its place in the life of Israel, and so, the history of the blessing of God.

Wisdom (*hokmâ*) is provided to answer the everyday question, ‘Now what do I do?’ After all, we need insight into specific situations and problems. For we often hear, ‘Who will give me some answers in the midst of the confusion and complexity of daily

⁴ ‘May that be the law for the people’ (Tanakh—*The Holy Scriptures* [Jewish Publication Society: 1988]).

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. ‘The Blessing of David: Humanity’s Charter’ in *The Law and the Prophets* ed. John H. Skilton (Presbyterian & Reformed: 1974), page 314.

life?’ (Themes of wisdom literature include: problem of justice [esp. retribution], distinction between righteous and the wicked [the experience of Job], the exhortation to personally trust the Lord, and meditation on the law.)

What this person needs is—initially—the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). Since this is ‘the beginning’ of wisdom, it means both the main point, as well as the source. As we turn in awe and wonder to the Lord, and seek His way, thereby avoiding all that is evil, wisdom is provided. And such wisdom is not the exclusive province of any special people (even less to those of a ‘high IQ’): it is open to all. Nevertheless, the Old Testament does speak of the ‘wise man’, that person who knows the counsel of God, who remains calm and ‘keeps his head in a crisis’ (so see Eccles. 12:9; Prov. 4:11; 8:5; 8:33, 35).

Yet this wisdom is not the accumulation of clever ideas and sayings. Rather, this person gains counsel, understanding, insight and power, just as all of these are ‘owned’ by God Himself in perfection (Job 12:13; Ps. 147:5), and freely dispensed by the Spirit (Exod. 31:3). A prime example of this is Solomon, who asks for a ‘hearing heart’ so that he could discern what was good and evil (see I Kings 3:9). And all of these elements converge on the figure promised to come, the Messiah (Isa. 11:2–3).

Examples from within the Psalter highlight the fact that wisdom is linked with blessing, and so covenantal:

- 1:1 Blessed (*ashere*) is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked (Ps. 1 encapsulates the content of the Psalter, as well as introducing the psalms).
- 2:12 blessed (*ashere*) are those who take refuge in the Lord (note the horizon of the nations).
- 29:11 The Lord will bless (*barak*) his people with peace.
- 32:1 Blessed (*ashere*) is the man whose transgression is forgiven.
- 33:12 Blessed (*ashere*) is the nation whose God is the Lord.
- 34:1 I will bless (*barak*) the Lord at all times.
- 65:4 Blessed (*ashere*) is he whom thou dost choose and bring near.
- 84:4 Blessed (*ashere*) are those who dwell in thy house.

BLESSING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A survey of terms leads to the conclusion that ‘blessing’, as such, did not play an important role within the New Testament. However, when we recall the trajectories observed within the Old Testament, we can discern two factors that interpret the concept within the New Testament. These are (i.) the conjunction of prior notions of blessing with covenant promise (especially seen in Gen. 12:1–3), and (ii.) the fact that the effects or implications of blessing were not confined to specific ‘blessing’ terms, but included concepts of peace, maturity, growth, fruitfulness and God’s presence.

So, as in (i.) in the New Testament there is a joining of prior usage of blessing (i.e., its history in the Old Testament) with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ: the earlier activities of the covenant Lord’s blessing converged and concentrated in the blessing of (and also, which is) Christ. Later this had implications for corporate worship, as had the Aaronic priestly blessing which concluded Israel’s worship, except now the scandalous sign of the Cross was connected with the benediction.

Also noteworthy in the New Testament is the correlation of God and creation, with blessing in and by Christ. If we ask whether there is within Christ's (and the Church's) ministry of word and work a singular focus on salvation, or a bipolar focus which includes community and creational growth and fruitfulness, we are bound to opt for the latter.

But what are the uses of the terms in the New Testament? There are three ways in which blessings are given: (i.) blessing of God, (ii.) blessing by Jesus Christ, and (iii.) blessing by people:

- (a) This occurs in nine passages, so Matthew 25:34; Acts 3:25–26; Romans 15:29; Galatians 3:8–9, 14; Hebrews 6:7–8; 6:14; 12:17; Ephesians 1:3; and I Peter 3:9. These texts will be considered under the heading 'The Blessing of God'.
- (b) The passages are Mark 10:16 (and parallels); Luke 9:16; 24:30, 50–51; Hebrews 7:1–7; Romans 15:29(?). The issues involved in these texts are covered in 'The Blessing of the Messiah'.
- (c) Passages here include the greetings in the Epistles and Hebrews 11:20–21; 7:1–7; Luke 6:28; I Corinthians 4:12; Romans 12:14; I Peter 3:9; Matthew 10:12–13; and Luke 10:5–6. In some there are clear references to blessings by persons in the Old Testament, without providing any example for the early Church. Others indicate the shift from cursing others to blessing them in the name of Christ. The critical citation is to the apostolic mission recorded in the Gospels. However, there is no explicit 'blessing' in this passage, although the 'peace' greeting of households is intended to convey the greeting of blessing. What is significant is the novel and unexpected apostolic kingdom mission itself, prior to the resurrection and Pentecost. Those called to follow the itinerant Jesus offer the message and ministry of Christ and the kingdom — to those who remain in their settled lives, wherever and whatever the contexts and communities.

The greetings in the Epistles may simply conform to contemporary epistolary protocol, but may also express the new situation inaugurated by the life and ministry of Christ.

We will consider these in relation to the transformation which has taken place in the life and ministry of Christ, and the realisation of God's covenant promises to Abraham.

Blessing of the Messiah

The Blessing Which is the Messiah

God's promise to Isaac in Genesis 26:3–4 (+ 24), '... I will be with you, and will bless you' is a hendiadys: that is, each statement interprets the other. The New Testament witness affirms that Jesus Christ is the promised blessing — incarnate. The incarnation is interpreted as the realisation and actualisation of the covenant promise 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people'. So Matthew (1:23) affirms that Jesus is called Immanuel (God with us) — to bless.

Again, the apostolic testimony that Jesus Christ is the wisdom and power of God (I Cor. 1:18–30) and the affirmation of the divine promises (II Cor. 1:20), lead us to

suggest that *it is the Messiah Himself that may be seen as the blessing of God*, for in and as Jesus, God deigns to dwell with humanity (cf John 1:14), that we may participate in grace and truth, the life and light of God. However, we must also remind ourselves of the paradox of Christ being the ‘curse’ as obverse to blessing, as argued by Paul in the Galatians correspondence (3:10–13).

Blessings from the Messiah

The Gospels record a number of instances when Jesus pronounced blessings. It is these that we now consider, with a further reference from Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

Mark 10:16 — the blessing of the children. In response to the requests of parents, and embarrassment of the disciples, Jesus follows the Rabbinic Yom Kippur practice of laying hands on children and praying for them. This appears to have needed neither interpretation nor justification. It perpetuates Old Testament and Jewish praxis, and indicates that Jesus saw his ministry extending to children as well as adults, encapsulating the whole of life and including everyone.

Matthew 5; and Luke 6 (but here coupled with ‘woes’) — *the Beatitudes*. The Beatitudes appear to be a communication that effectively conveys the blessing cited, an exhortation to live according to the blessing, and a congratulation or commendation to certain recipients. The term may be translated as ‘happy’, or ‘fortunate’. Is Matthew speaking of requirements for entrance into the Kingdom? Certainly each speak of the presence of the kingdom in the person of Christ — Jesus is one with all those addressed by the beatitudes.

Luke 9:16; 22:19 — Blessing at meals and the Lord’s (Last) Supper. This is not a novel act of thanksgiving. Jesus blessed food at meals — both outdoors as he fed the thousands with fish and bread (see Luke 9:16; par. Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; 8:4–10; John 6:1–14; cf. Paul in Acts 20:11; 27:35), and indoors as host of the Supper, before and after the crucifixion (Luke 22:19; 24:30–31). Thanks are expressed for both the bread and wine, as well as the body and blood which God has by the Spirit prepared for Him (see Heb. 10:5, 10): this is coupled with an acknowledgment of God’s bountiful provision to creation.

Luke 24:50–51 — post-resurrection farewell. This is not a priestly or liturgical blessing, rather a farewell benediction as the climax of the ‘Gospel’. Just prior to this is the comment that remission of sins should be preached in Jesus’ name to all nations. It appears to have links with the departure of Elijah, who blesses with the Spirit (see II Kings 2:9–15). The sequel to the Lord’s blessing is the disciples’ worship and blessing God (Luke 24:52–53). This may parallel the promise of continued presence (Matt. 28:20; cf. John 14:27) and atonement based ‘peace’ (John 20:19, 21).

Romans 15:29 — the fullness of the blessing of Christ. Here we note the apostle’s assurance that when he does finally come to the church in Rome, he comes with the fullness (i.e. Eph. 3:19) of the blessing of Christ. There is the notion of *apostolic parousia*, coming in and with the authority and power of Christ (cf. I Cor. 4:18 – 5:13), to encourage, exhort and edify the community (cf. letters to the churches in Rev. 2 – 3). That is, Christ’s blessing of His church in Rome will be pure, without compromise or contamination, conveying ‘spiritual gifts’, sharing mutual encouragement, reaping a harvest. Paul recognised all gifts also imply a duty to continued service. There is also the opportunity to minister without the burden and responsibilities of the collection for the ‘mother’ church in Jerusalem. However, Paul’s visit to Rome was not as expected, coming as appellant to the emperor, rather than apologist heading for Spain.

The Blessing of God

While God is nominated as the One who blesses in Galatians 3:8–14, Acts 3:25–26, and Hebrews 6, rather than Christ, all are linked to Christ, as all recapitulate the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 and/or Genesis 22:17–18. Here in the New Testament the blessing heritage is radically changed to focus on Christ, with the covenant promise of blessing fulfilled Christologically.

The Abrahamic promise of blessing provides the basis for three aspects to be fulfilled — the resolution of blessing and cursing, the ‘promised blessing’, and the destiny of the nations. All three aspects are dealt with by Paul in the Galatian epistle, where Abraham is pivotal in the apostle’s covenant theology. Passages from Acts and Hebrews confirm the Pauline logic and position.

The Father Gives His Son as the Curse

The Pauline understanding of ‘blessing’ and ‘curse’ are embedded in covenant theology. The context of citations from Deuteronomy (27:26; and 21:23) indicates covenant judgment and renewal: this was later experienced by Israel with the exile and restoration. The apostle’s argument is that the Christ submitted to the fullness of the covenant exilic curse of Israel, so that the blessing of covenant renewal might reach the fullness of the nations. The immediate context reveals that Israel under the Torah brought upon itself the curse for disobedience, as evidenced by the contemporary Roman occupation and oppression.

The Messiah represents Israel and, as such, takes the covenant curse upon Himself, in its entirety. ‘The crucifixion of the Messiah is, one might say, the *quintessence* of the curse of exile, and its climatic act’.⁶ The curse had excluded Israel from enjoying its proper membership in the Abrahamic people, and being the means whereby the Abrahamic blessing could reach out to the waiting Gentiles. In the life, death and resurrection of Christ as the gift of God, Paul shows the pattern of exile and restoration, covenant judgment and renewal enacted. In fact, Christ became a curse for us, in an action paralleled in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence (II Cor. 5:21 — ‘he who knew no sin became sin for us’). Paul also insists that the initiative for this action is divine, for as in Romans 3:25 where ‘God put forward [Jesus Christ] as a propitiation’, so here the Father devotes His only Son to satisfy and fulfil the requirements and provisions of the covenant — both its blessing and curse aspects.

The Spirit as the Promised Blessing

The Abrahamic promise has been realised in God’s salvific praxis in Christ, in the deliberate and explicit Christological transformation of this Old Testament blessing. Both gifts of justification (by faith) and the Spirit are aspects of the promise. How does Paul understand the Spirit at this point?

Paul argues that the Spirit’s coming as gift (Acts 3:22) was contingent upon the coming and ministry of Christ: the Spirit has a covenantal and Christological basis. Christ as the faithful covenant Son–Heir received the Spirit (both at His baptism and ascension: Matt. 3:16; Acts 10:38; 2:33), which He dispensed at Pentecost with the baptismal judgment: this act overturns the confusion of Babel with the confession of the

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (T. & T. Clark: 1991), page 151.

baptised. Later the same Spirit (now, of Christ) is poured out on Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 8, 10).

Paul identifies the Spirit as the specific ‘promise’ made to Abraham (cf. Acts 1:4), coming as the sequel to the death of Christ. Thus, this is now the era or epoch of the Spirit (this raises the matter of the eschaton, for the Spirit is the first fruit and guarantee of the new creation), with the Spirit as the present power and reality of Christ (received by faith in the crucified Christ of apostolic kerygma: Gal. 3:1–5). The Spirit is the blessing of the renewed covenant (see Jer. 31; and Ezek. 36), donated both to the Gentiles and to the renewed Israel. And both enjoy membership in the Abrahamic family on the basis of faith.

For the Pauline doctrine of life in the Spirit: see Galatians and Romans 6 – 8.

The Blessing of the Nations

God supplies and works for the Gentiles: previously God had reckoned on behalf of Abraham. In this we see the priority of grace over human activity or response. God ushered the Gentiles into the kingdom and community of faith in fulfilment of the promise as a sheer unexpected act of grace. God was faithful to His promise, Christ fulfils the divine pledge to bless the Gentiles by ushering all nations into God’s kingdom. Involved in this is the liberation, justification and sanctification of the nations from idolatry into the true worship of God in Christ by the Spirit. The blessing includes not only parity or partnership of the Gentiles with Jews, but also both become joint-heirs with the faithful covenant Messiah. So the Gentiles have been blessed because of Abraham, and his Son. They may at last inherit the promised blessing (as per Gen. 12; 15; and 18). Christ fulfilled what Israel (as Abraham’s ‘sons’) had failed to do for God and the nations. (See, too, Eph. 1:3, for blessing explicitly linked with the salvific mystery of God, the recapitulation of all things in Jesus Christ. This is explicitly Trinitarian, for Paul writes of the Father who blesses in the Son with the Spirit.)

Paul’s position is confirmed by that of Peter and the writer to the Hebrews. In Acts 3:25–26, we read the apostle Peter’s inspired testimony to the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise in the elect Christ, with the blessed gift of salvation via repentance — initially offered to the Jews, but also directed to the Gentiles. However, as Boer observes:

In 3:35 and 26 there is manifest an awareness that the blessings of salvation are to be mediated to the world at large through the Jews to whom the gospel comes first, but there is no indication of the manner in which this is to be done.⁷

The initial unknown manner became known and employed in Acts 10, where Peter’s prompted ministry to the Gentiles takes place. As trustee of the keys of the kingdom, Peter opens the kingdom to the nations, who simultaneously receive the Spirit and the gifts of repentance to life and forgiveness of sins. (See, too, Peter’s encouragement to the scattered Christians in I Pet. 3:9, ‘you have been called as joint heirs to inherit God’s blessing’.)

Further, in Hebrews 6, it is presupposed that the promise had reached its goal, with patient Abraham himself becoming the paradigm for the Church in its waiting for the promises to be fulfilled.

⁷ Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Mission* (Eerdmans: 1975), pages 37–38.

Finally, within the New Testament we can trace the continuity of the Old Testament heritage of blessing, plus its Christological transformation. And by means of indicators of the future state and experience of salvation, the motif of blessing comes to the fore.

BLESSING IN THE CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Jesus Christ and the Community of Blessing

Both Testaments speak of blessing in two ways: (i.) the rite of blessing, especially the blessing of a group or person by a priest during worship, and (ii.) a blessing by God in a way or manner not linked to a form or act, underscoring God's freedom. The Church itself stands within the ongoing history of the blessing of God, must acknowledge its place and what has gone before.

Two steps in relation to blessing are affirmed in the Scriptures:

- (a) *The uniting of blessing with history by God Himself.* Blessing was transcended as a magical act, or conferring of or transaction of power. The interpersonal human wishes and aspirations were transcended by the blessing of the community by a person or priest, who blessed in the name of God (cf. Num. 6): it has become the very act of God in blessing His people, as they leave each other and return to their homes and daily vocation.
- (b) *The conjunction of the blessing of God with the work of Christ.* Seen within the context of Christian worship, blessing is interpreted solely in terms of the radical change it underwent in God's action in Christ. What is critical here is the fact that death is no longer the limit or terminus of God's donation of blessing. Hence, the obverse element — cursing — is eliminated from Christian worship.

Blessing is no longer recognised by mere outward or empirical evidence, but known by faith as inseparably linked and hidden in the death of Christ at the Cross. This provides the basis for the use of the sign of the Cross when the Church blesses. To the blessing of the Church we now turn.

Blessing in Worship—Greeting and Benediction

The greeting salutation and parting dismissal of the Church's worship are of a piece; they are not simply 'incidental formulary matters'.⁸ Everyday greetings and farewells were made in reference to God (e.g. 'good-bye' as contraction of *God be with you!*).

So, with congregational worship as an occasion for the community to gather, the opening greeting (*The Lord be with you. And also with you.*) is mutual, and is to be taken seriously by those meeting together in and with Christ to worship the Father, in the Spirit. It affirms the presence and power of God to those who gather, and their response to this promise and actuality. As Peter Brunner says: 'the Salutation joins the participants in the action through the gift transmitted in it. This joining function of the Salutation becomes especially apparent in the mutual salutation'.

Again, to cite Brunner, 'the Benediction is always a "final" word, comprehending all other words spoken thus far. It is spoken, as it were, on the threshold of a farewell.

⁸ Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, (Concordia Publishing House: 1968), page 136.

It dismisses the person blessed into a new situation, into a new task'. The unilateral farewell blessing provides the link between congregational worship and ongoing daily service.

Brunner summarises the Church's blessing:

To be sure, Christ did not issue to His church any explicit mandate to pronounce blessings; but He Himself blessed (Mark 10:16). When departing from this earth, He pronounced a blessing on His disciples (Luke 24:50). The entire work of Jesus is summarized in His mission to bless, because Abraham's blessing was fulfilled in Him (Acts 3:35f.). He let His disciples share in His power to bless (John 14:12). The disciples' salutation of peace is not an empty formula, but filled with pneumatic reality (Luke 10:5f.; Matt. 10:12f.). And the resurrected Christ does not withdraw the power and authority which He bestowed in His disciples. The words of the departing Christ: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20) richly confer this power on them.

A church which would only ask for a blessing in the form of prayer but would no longer venture to bless in direct address would be of little faith and disobedient to the obligation in the transmitted authorization to bless. The Lord, who is present with His power to bless in the words of the Salutation and the Benediction, makes these words the vessel of His gift of blessing.⁹

Further, the form of the service incorporates a constant form of blessing, with the changing rhythm of contemporary events and issues linking the vertical with the horizontal; with the word written, preached and incarnate as font and focus. All these elements coincide in Christ as He continues His ministry for the Father in and to the world. In fact, the blessings of creation (vocation, marriage, harvest, crises or passages of life) — the whole spectrum of human life — are part and parcel of the worshipping life of the Church.

Sacraments as the Blessing of God

Both sacraments as dominical rites are expression of the blessing of God to His people. Baptism, as the means of entrance into the Kingdom and the Church, is a form of covenant judgment, with an appeal to the Lord for vindication, and personal exemption from the curse. Yet this takes place by participation in the vicarious humanity of Christ. (See Colossians for the conjunction of circumcision and baptism [Col. 2:9–15].) It signifies the incorporation of the nations into Christ, and the gift of the Spirit donated to humanity.

Within the Lord's Supper we note the blessing of the elements (cf. the 'cup of blessing', I Cor. 10:16). There is some continuity between 'ordinary' meals and supper with the Lord. The meal is the locus for fellowship, as a bond of community, and opportunity to offer a 'sacrifice of praise to God . . . the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name' (Heb. 13:15). There is thanksgiving for the elements which are 'random samples' of the creation looking and longing for the liberty of the new creation, yet currently preserved and sustained by the Creator, for food and nourishment, and for the presence and power of the saving and blessing Lord (cf. I Cor. 11:25–34; Jesus comes as Covenant Lord both to bless and judge).

The Blessing of the Eschaton

The Book of Revelation draws together the threads running through the history of God's blessing, with the revelation itself being given by the Father to the Son, and disclosed by the Spirit to the Church among the nations. Three aspects highlight the

⁹ Brunner, *op. cit.*, page 135.

role and function of Christ as the Priest–King, who blesses the nations, removes the curse(s) from creation, and ushers in the new creation as the fullness of blessing.

The Blessing of Christ — the Melchizedek Priest–King

Jesus Christ is portrayed as the Melchizedek Priest–King (so Heb. 7; Rev. 1ff.) who blesses the people of God (cf. Gen. 14:19–20). He brings the revelation of and from Father to the Church and, as the slain Lamb, directs history and effects the fruit of the Cross as blessing and judgment. He distributes the peace of God, purifies His Church(es), disciples the nations, and puts down all authority and power to deliver the kingdom into His Father’s hand (I Cor. 15:23–28).

The Blessing Applied — the Removal of the Curse

Christ applies the blessings and curses of the Cross to humanity and creation (Rev. 8:13ff. for woes applied). There are blessings on those who overcome the enemies of God by their testimony to Jesus under the Spirit (Rev. 14:13), in the face of the wrath of God poured from the cup of anger on all false worship(pers), together with the bowls of wrath. In Revelation 12ff., the curses are played out and all under the curse are dealt with, with only the blessed remaining. The goal is the creation liberated from exploitation and idolatry (Gen. 3:13–21; Rom. 8:19–23; 1:25).

Fullness of Blessing—Fulfilment and Feasting

The third aspect obvious in Revelation is the final fullness of blessing, expressed in feasting and the freedom of inheriting and seeing the blessing of God. What Christ promised in the Gospels has been realised — ‘Come, blessed of my Father, to inherit the kingdom’ (Matt. 25:34), and share in the eschatological feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets (Luke 13:28ff.). As marriages have pointed to the marriage of the Lamb and His Bride, so those invited are blessed (Rev. 19:9; cf. Matt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13).

The earlier gardens of Eden and Canaan have been transcended by the new creation with its tree of life: there is the fullness of the Spirit, unrestrained worship of the Father, and moral purity (Rev. 22:14; cf. Eph. 5:25–27). At last, God dwells with His people — the nations (Isa. 65:16–25): the blessing promised has been actualised (there is nothing accursed, Rev. 22:3; nor any more mourning, crying and pain, Rev. 21:5).

CONCLUSION

Our study has traced the history of blessing, or given the nature of the Abrahamic promise, the history of the Gospel. We have seen blessing as integral to the life of Israel, as covenant people of God, as part of the heritage of Jesus and his contemporaries, and the blessings of the Church in the stream of the history of the blessing of God. With its origin in the Old Testament in family and expressions of family in wider community, blessing was transformed by God’s work in Christ, whereby the blessing is realised in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and consummated in the Cross and the New Creation. This was especially seen in the covenant promise of blessing to Abraham and its realisation in Christ, with the inheritance enjoyed by the nations.

Abraham rejoiced to see Christ and His day (John 8:56), and for the covenant blessings to encompass the nations. This universal blessing is reciprocated in the

response of the Church and creation in its blessing of the God and Father of the Lord Jesus, and the Amen addressed to God. The words of David the Psalmist epitomise such perichoretic blessing:

May his [the king's] name endure for ever . . .
May men bless themselves by him,
all nations call him blessed!
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name for ever;
may his glory fill the whole earth!
Amen and Amen! (Ps. 72:17–19).

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STUDY SIX

The Irrevocable Blessing

(by Deane Meatheringham)



GOD IS CONSTANT IN HIS CONSTANCY WHILE WE ARE CONSTANT IN OUR INCONSTANCY

Romans 11:25–36 needs to be read to bring us to the main biblical text of this study, which is verse 29: *The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable*. The Divine charismata and call must be that they are not to be repented of and are enduring.

Pastorally, we are frequently serving people who have become discouraged because they have discovered some sin in their lives. This may have caused them to think that God has changed his mind regarding them and withdrawn his love and benevolence from them. Insecurity as to whether they have God's favour or not is a lever used by self-motivated folk to gain or hold their place with God. To be sure of their election for eternal salvation, wrong teaching here can cause people to look into themselves to find the signs of their election. And where there is a legalistic spirit, there arises the insidious blindness of presumption.

The passage in Romans 11 dashes any self-centred hope that Israel might have of establishing a claim upon God and of putting God under obligation. It makes it clear that Israel's salvation will be the forgiveness which comes from the sheer mercy of God. But human disobedience is firmly related to the triumphant, all-embracing grace of God. The passage stresses the sovereign action of God. Israel's unbelief, as culpable as it is, is not merely a matter of disobedience, but a divine hardening is involved, which is reason for the Gentiles not to give way to a feeling of superiority and presumption.

The two contrasting statements of verse 28 are not to be seen as balancing each other. Israel has become an enemy of God through the rejection of the gospel. But God's election promise to the patriarchs stands inviolable, and has never been withdrawn. Israel is still beloved of God, and although they know God's wrath, his wrath is in fact the action of mercy and covenant faithfulness.

The charismata in verse 29 may refer to Romans 9:4–5, and are the benefits of God's calling. By God's special calling his people stand beside him to fulfil his

universal purpose. Neither of these is to be repented of by God. God has not changed his mind. Shall their lack of faith make of no effect the faithfulness of God? (Rom. 3:3).

We need to keep in mind the dangers of illusions about the Church. The Gospel has always brought out the worst in us. In the Church the hostility of humankind against God is brought to a head and a crisis. In the Church the indifference, the presumption, the misunderstanding and the opposition attains its most sublime and most naive form. Even though it is in the Church that human achievement is imagined to be invested with divine power, it is here that it is finally checked by God.

Therefore, while we remain constant in our inconstancy, God remains constant in his constancy:

For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts (Mal. 3:6–7).

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your redeemer (Isa. 54:7–8).

THE BASIS FOR THE IRREVOCABLE BLESSING IS COVENANT

The gifts and the *call* of God are enduring. God never changes his mind regarding his everlasting covenant (Rom. 11:28–29). To do so would be to deny himself (II Tim. 2:11ff.). The call of God is his electing. It is God's covenant choice. We are '*chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace*' (Rom. 11:5–6).

Our assurance is not in ourselves, but in God himself (Rom. 9:15–16). We are called not because of anything we have done or might do. But if we posit a covenant of works at creation which relates to all men and women, and another covenant of grace for the elect, then God's love will be limited to those chosen from eternity, and the remainder will be hated by God. But we have seen that the covenant originates in the Godhead itself and is the relationship which God has with the whole of creation. God's love extends to the world and he elects by grace, ultimately for the sake of the world. Irresistible grace is the way all persons return to God. Jesus Christ is that way. There is no dark will behind the God who has revealed himself savingly for all men in Christ. There is no distinction between God *in essentia* and God in relation to humanity. There is no split in God to make us uncertain forever of who God is and whether he loves us or not.

To answer the question of whether we are among the elect or not, is not to be found by looking into our lives to find qualifying evidences of God's unmerited grace. No test is foolproof, and there is the problem of hypocrisy, which is the spur for self-motivation in religion. Our assurance is in God himself; it is in Jesus Christ. Calvin says '*All points of our salvation are complete in Him*'. On the assurance of election Calvin writes:

Hence, those whom God has adopted as sons, he is said to have elected, not in themselves, but in Christ Jesus (Eph. i.4); because he could love them only in him, and only as being previously made partakers with him, honour them with the inheritance of his kingdom. But if we are elected in him, we cannot find the certainty of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father,

The Irrevocable Blessing

if we look at him apart from the Son. Christ, then, is the mirror in which we ought, and in which, without deception, we may contemplate our election.¹

The basis for our certainty of God's non-withdrawal of his blessing is his covenant where God says 'Yes' to us in Christ and 'No' to every other way.

WHAT GOD HAS BLESSED CAN'T BE CURSED

A teaching example of this is the narrative in Numbers when King Balak of Moab panics at the licking he might get from Israel. He joins forces with Midian to pay divination fees to have Israel cursed. The maverick prophet Balaam is recognised as one who could make his blessings and his cursings stick (Num. 22:6). Israel is God's called, covenant people, and God forbids Balaam to curse a people whom he has blessed (Num. 22:12). Balak's people have another go at employing Balaam, who now asks for what he has really been told not to ask for. This time, in his relationship with a man who is perverse, God tells Balaam to go with Balak's men, but to only do as God bids him (Num. 22:20).

Now God faces Balaam as a menace. An ass can see what Balaam would not see. And the Word of God, which never originates in the brain of a man, comes from Balaam's ass. Now Balaam has learned only to say what the Lord had commanded. As Balaam sees the people of Israel, he says to Balak:

How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? . . . God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it . . . For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!' (Num. 23:8, 19–20, 23).

Balak's response to all of this was that Balaam say nothing at all, but Balaam now blesses God's people, assuring Israel of her perseverance and victory. *We cannot undo what God has blessed, we cannot make it void or turn it to our own ends. God's creational blessing stands immutable. His blessing on marriage cannot be undone in spite of all the sabotaging devices of an adulterous generation. God's blessing on those whom he has called cannot be withdrawn or overturned, even where his people have not known it or have fought against it.*

GOD DOES NOT REPENT OF BEING THE ONE HE IS

The living God is not subject to any alteration and does not cease to be himself.

God is not man, that he should lie, or the son of a man, that he should repent (Num. 23:10).

I am who I am (Exod. 3:14).

For I the Lord do not change (Mal. 3:6).

Of old thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They will perish, but thou dost endure; they will wear out like a garment. Thou changest them like raiment, and they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have no end (Ps. 102:25–27).

¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970), p. 244.

The Irrevocable Blessing

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (James 1:17, AV).

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever (Heb. 13:8).

It is impossible that God should prove false (Heb. 6:18).

The uninterrupted continuity of God spoken of in these Scriptures cannot be abstracted from the living God who is the only origin of all created change.² The life which is in God will never sever itself from this God and it will never possess a form of operating which is alien to him. To take the passages we have quoted above, and to put a fence around them, would be the death of God. An immobile God is a petrified God. In our insecurity we may attempt to grasp statements about God's constancy, fix them in a time glass, do our thinking and living from this delusion and find that we have a conservative paralysis. But the incarnate Son is now Lord over all history; not just past history, but the future ages and present affairs. Christ the cosmocrator relates to people who are living in the dynamic movements of decision making and the processive progress of history.

It is not that the passages quoted above have to be qualified by other passages which do speak of God saying or doing something which he retracts (e.g. Gen. 6:6f.; Exod. 32:9ff.; Amos 7:1–6; Jer. 18:1–10). Recall how God first forbade Balaam to go with Balak, then let him, and then met him as a menace. This was not a figurative way in which God deals with a man. God is actively relating to a perverse man (Ps. 18:25ff.). The God who is above the ages is also their Lord, and the master of his own way, so that he partakes in their alteration. This means that there is something corresponding to the alteration in his own being. Yet he is always the same in every change. God can retract in the most frightening manner, and show himself as the author of the curse, and the One who he is in his wrath. But he never repents of the One who he is. He is the One who, even in the exercise of his curse, is the God of Israel who will never repent of his call. The blessings of creation stand, but for sinful man they can be to him the experience of the curse. *Even when the Lord repents of his help, he is still Israel's helper.*

God's constancy is not mathematical. His consistency is not a supreme, concrete, abstract law. Rather, as the constant, faithful One, the living God possesses a relational life and a mobility which is no less divine than his perseverance and constancy. God's constancy remains the same in every change.

C. S. Lewis illustrates this truth wonderfully in *The Horse and His Boy*.³ Shasta was on a road to somewhere, but it all depended on what you meant by somewhere. He was feeling very sorry for himself and thinking of himself as the most unfortunate boy that had ever lived in the whole world. An invisible companion had begun to walk beside him. Shasta could hear and feel the warm breath of the Thing.

'Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?' said Shasta.

'There was only one lion,' said the Voice.

'What on earth do you mean? I've just told you there were at least two the first night, and—'

'There was only one: but he was swift of foot.'

'How do you know?'

'I was the lion.' And as Shasta gasped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. 'I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the

² See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pt 1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1970), pp. 490ff.

³ Fontana, 1954, pp. 138–140.

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houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses new strength of fear for the last mile so that you could reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you.'

'Then it was you who wounded Aravis?'

'It was I.'

'But what for?'

'Child,' said the Voice, 'I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own.'

'Who *are* you?' asked Shasta.

'Myself,' said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again 'Myself,' loud and clear and gay: and then a third time 'Myself', whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

STUDY SEVEN

The Blessing of Election to Holiness

(by Robin Mitchell)



The subject of Election is one that has caused much debate and controversy, yet one cannot read the Scriptures without being confronted by the subject. Like it or not, it is there and must be addressed. The Biblical writers often speak of God's choosing, but they never seek to rationalise or justify it. Election is spoken of pastorally not theologically. I will seek to briefly state the doctrine as it is found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, but will make no attempt to deal with the problems and common objections raised against the teaching, as argument and theological debate can be endless and of little value. Election is not spoken of in the Scriptures to promote debate, but rather to declare the blessing of God's love for his people. If you come to it in this way, it will prove to be a solid foundation for your faith and ministry.

ELECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God's election of Israel is one of the concepts that distinguishes Judaism from other religions.¹ The teaching is stated in various ways:

And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many"' (Josh. 24:2-3. RSV).

While the verb 'to take' (j q|) is used rather than 'choose' (rxb), the idea is the same. We note the strong hand of God. Abraham was God's choice and he chose him from out of his family even though he was an idolater like the rest of his family:

¹ Norman Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Epworth, 1950), ch. 6.

But the LORD has taken (j ql) you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own possession, as at this day (Deut. 4:20, RSV).

In the Old Testament, election is most often used of God's choice of Israel the nation. As in the case of Abraham, Israel did not choose God, but God chose Israel. Something of God's purpose in election can be seen here. He wanted a people for himself. We will see this emphasis repeated:

And because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them, and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than yourselves, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as at this day; know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (Deut. 4:37–39, RSV).

Israel's election is referred to in order to call attention to the fact of God's sovereignty. Because he is God, he can choose Israel or drive out the nations as he wills. Israel's comfort is that they are secure in God's choice of them, and they may rest assured in the midst of their enemies because the Sovereign God has loved them. This is what I mean when speaking of the teaching of election as being of a pastoral nature.

Election, God's Free Choice

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deut. 7:6–8, RSV).

This choice of Israel is quite unmerited and in fact is surprising. Moses puts the rhetorical question to Israel:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you (Deut. 10:12).

The answer is given and then we read:

Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it; yet the LORD set his heart in love upon your fathers and chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as at this day [emphasis mine].

In verse 15, 'yet' (or 'only', qr), is a strong, restrictive adverb used regularly to introduce exceptions and for introducing what is contrary to expectation.² As someone has said, 'How odd of God to choose the Jews'. Yet he did.

God's choice of Israel is that which makes them a holy people. As we have seen with Abraham, the elect are called from their idolatry and called apart for God's purposes. The holiness of the holy people is not to be seen as their own virtue. God's choice of Israel does not depend on any good in them. The Lord said to Israel concerning the promised inheritance of Canaan:

² Snaith, p. 135.

Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land'; whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you (Deut. 9:4).

Know therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people (9:6).

Yet they are chosen in spite of their rebellion. Yahweh's choice of them is his free choice. The reason that Moses gives Israel for their being chosen is that God has set his love upon them (7:6). He loves you because he loves you. 'YHWH had simply "fallen in love" with Israel's ancestors, choosing them over every other people'.³ That is the reason. We also read that he has sworn an oath of blessing to their fathers. This is not a second reason, and does not mean that God's choice is no longer free. He chose their father Abraham, and his descendants. But he chose Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob and not Esau. God's choice is entirely free and is not determined by ancestry.

God's Purpose in the Election of Israel

God's election is not without purpose, and this is seen in God's choice of Abram:

I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse (Gen. 12:3, RSV).

The RSV translates:

and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

While this is a legitimate translation, the NIV is to be preferred:⁴

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

The ambiguity may be deliberate with both ideas intended. The point is that Abraham is chosen not just for his own sake but for the sake of 'all people'.

God's purpose in election is further spelled out by Jeremiah:

For as the waistcloth clings to the loins of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the LORD, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen (Jer. 13:11, RSV).

We often find the expressions for 'his name's sake' or 'for his own sake', and here they are to be for him 'a name'. What does this mean? What does God have in mind? The best commentary is found in Jeremiah chapter 33:

The Chaldeans are coming in to fight and to fill them with the dead bodies of men whom I shall smite in my anger and my wrath, for I have hidden my face from this city because of all their wickedness. Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them; they shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it. Thus says the LORD: In this place of which you say, 'It is a waste without man or beast,' in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD: 'Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is

³ Gary S. Shogren, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Doubleday, New York, 1992) p. 436.

⁴ Shogren, p. 436.

good, for his steadfast love endures for ever!’ For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the LORD (Jer. 33:5–11, RSV).

Judgment will come to Jerusalem, yet, because of his electing love, they may be assured that God will yet bring them healing, security, restoration, forgiveness and cleansing. Joy and mirth will once more fill the city and these chosen ones will come in thanksgiving and praise because of the goodness of Yahweh.

All of these blessings are contingent upon nothing other than God’s electing love. What he intends for them he will effect within them. (Note the ‘I wills’ of the passage.) This, of course, is the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27). (‘And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.’)

These blessings are poured out upon the elect that they may be ‘a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth’ (v. 9). God’s plan for the nations relates to his choosing of Israel. The same thing is seen in Exodus:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:5–6).

As God’s ‘Own Possession’ ((h)lgs, special treasure or crown jewel), they are bound to him by his love covenant (context). They are caught up with him in his plan to bless the nations. Durham comments that as a kingdom of priests, ‘Israel is committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh’s Presence . . . a kingdom run not by politicians depending upon strength and connivance but by priests depending on faith in Yahweh, a servant nation instead of a ruling nation’.⁵ As a holy nation they are a ‘showcase to the world of how being in covenant with God changes a people’.⁶

Because of their calling, Israel has a greater responsibility to obey God, and their failure to do so will incur harsh judgment:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: ‘You only have I known [I] of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’ (Amos 3:1–2, RSV).

God’s purpose in election, the proclaiming of his grace to the nations, will not be thwarted by Israel’s sin. His grace will be declared by the very fact that he persists with this rebellious, wayward people, judging them in his holy love, forgiving them, cleansing them, healing them, restoring them and placing his Spirit within them.

Isaiah speaks of the eschatological fulfilment of God’s plan for the nations in passages such as:

In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’ (Isa. 19:24–25, RSV).

God’s Election of Israel to Sonship

Isaiah shows us that this chosen people are none other than the sons and daughters of God:

⁵ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Word, 1987), p. 263.

⁶ *ibid*, pp. 262f.

I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made (Isa. 43:6–7, RSV).

This is not a new idea. The Deuteronomist records God's word to Pharaoh concerning Israel, 'Let my son go that he may serve me' (Exod. 4:23). While this concept is not developed much in the Hebrew scriptures, Israel is declared to be God's son and he is Israel's Father. But the Israelites are not elected because they are sons, but God's election determines and marks their sonship and, at the same time, declares his fatherhood. 'God's electing Israel is virtually the same as his fathering'.⁷ He deals with his people as the true Father–Redeemer (Isa. 63:16).

ELECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament we find the same things being emphasised. At first glance it seems that the emphasis is on the election of individuals rather than of a nation, but this is not entirely correct.

Election, God's Choice

The word of election is clear. Paul writes:

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (II Thess. 2:13, RSV).

Salvation is bestowed according to God's choice from the beginning. It is not determined by sanctification and belief (note that 'sanctification' is placed before 'belief'). In this context sanctification is the work of the Spirit drawing us away from sin to Christ. It is through sanctification and the gift of faith⁸ that the salvation of God is applied.

This is also evident elsewhere:

Jesus answered them, 'I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep' (John 10:25–26, RSV).

We note that 'belonging' precedes 'believing'. Again we read:

And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed (Acts 13:48).

Peter begins his first letter by saying:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (I Pet. 1:1–2, RSV).

⁷ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Molynomah, Oregon, 1991), p. 129.

⁸ Philippians 1:29; Acts 14:27; 11:18.

Here we find sanctification preceding obedience. Obedience is not the ground of salvation, but the consequence of it. For this we thank God, for salvation depends on God not us.

God's Purpose in Electing the Church

Peter quotes from Exodus saying:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy (I Pet. 2:9–10).

Those who are thus chosen, both Jews and Gentiles, together form the new nation of God. There is a new chosen race and, like Israel, its function is to proclaim God's wonderful deeds and live to glorify him. For this they must:

Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation (v. 12).

The church, then, is called to be the people of God in the midst of the nations. A people saved by the grace of God that has come in Jesus Christ and who now live in obedience to him, offering spiritual sacrifices (2:5) and giving glory to God.

Paul also emphasises that we are to live 'to the praise of his glorious grace':

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:3–6; also Col. 3:12ff.).

There are other things of importance here also. We are told that God has blessed us in Christ with every Spiritual blessing. Christ is the one in whom every blessing is found. The blessings promised to Abraham and to Israel are realised in Messiah Jesus. As Karl Barth has said of Christ, '[here] is the God who elected and called Abraham, in a human person'.⁹ He then speaks of Jesus as the goal of Israel's election and of ours.

The old man Simeon said as he sighted Jesus:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation (Luke 2:29–30, *RSV*).

The Salvation of God lies here in Mary's arms.

Paul writes:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God (II Cor. 1:20, *RSV*).

The blessings of the nations promised through the seed of Abraham are to be found in God's elect one, 'that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious' (I Pet. 2:4, *RSV*). In him the plan of God will come to fruition.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt 2 (T. & T. Clark, 1958), p. 583.

Election to Sonship

In Ephesians 1:5, Paul indicates that ‘He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ’. The concept of God’s Fatherhood and our sonship is developed widely in the New Testament. This intimate relationship of Father and family is the goal of all election.

Election, How It Is Effected

Turning to look at Paul’s famous statement in Romans chapter 8, we see that his concern is pastoral. He sets forth an *ordo salutis* as follows:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he **foreknew** [προέγνω] he also **predestined** [προώρισεν] to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also **called** [ἐκάλεισεν]; and those whom he called he also **justified** [ἐδικαίωσε]; and those whom he justified he also **glorified** [ἐδόξασεν] (Rom. 8:28–30, RSV).

We are foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified. From beginning to end we are secured by the action of God and established irrevocably in Christ, and so Paul writes:

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (vv. 31–35).

CONCLUSIONS AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

The doctrine of election bids us see that our relationship with God is of his choosing, not ours. If it were otherwise, then we could have no certainty of being accepted. The matter being God’s choice, made before time began, unmerited on our part and effected while we were yet enemies, is the only thing that assures us that all is well and that we will not be condemned. Piper says of election, ‘It is the great first work of free grace that takes away the final refuge of human self-reliance and casts man on the unshakeable Rock of covenant love’.¹⁰

Election sets us free from an endless burden of good works and self-justification. It means that when we sin and are less than perfect, we need not live in terror, remorse and self-condemnation as many Christians perpetually do. But, knowing that we are chosen and brought into Christ, his death for sin and to sin is ever ours. In his love our conscience can take its rest.

Our election is to holiness, to sonship, to be the chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. All this we are in Christ. This is the foundation and the framework for Christian living and for our ministries.

Rather than lulling us to sleep while God ‘does it all’, our election calls us to participate in God’s plan to bless the nations by declaring ‘the wonderful deeds of him

¹⁰ Piper, p. 137.

who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light', and by living to 'the praise of his glorious grace' as sinners made sons.

Our lives and congregations and will reflect the Father's desire, 'that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory' (Jer. 13:11). Our calling is a high calling, affording us purpose and dignity as the sons of God and servants of the King.

Election turns us away from the burden of being a Christian, and having to do things for God, from endless programs and new ideas. It calls us instead to live simply as the children of God in the freedom of the love of the Father and the Son, in the renewing power of the Spirit, enjoying the rich fellowship of the family. As we do so, there will be mirth and gladness in the streets of the city of God and in our congregations.

Wesley has written:

'He hath loved, He hath loved us, because He would love.'¹¹

This is election, the Blessing of God.

* * * *

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¹¹ *Methodist Hymn Book*, no. 66, 'Oh God of All Grace'.

STUDY EIGHT

The Blessing of Destination of Adoption

(by Rodney James)



BASKING IN THE BLESSING

This study is not so much a reaching after that which we have not known as a revelling in that which we already know. It is not so much a theological excursion as a little trip to heaven. It is not a matter of extending the borders of our tent to include blessings we have not previously had, but a treasuring of the pearl of great price which is already ours in Christ.

THE FULLNESS OF BLESSING IN THE FULLNESS OF ADOPTION INTO THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST'S SONSHIP

A Christian friend of mine who is a great encourager used to say to me, 'See you at the terminus if not before'. The terminus or *telos* of our faith is a very important focus of Christian life. It is by looking ahead to our destination that we gain our bearings for the present journey, and know who we are along the way. That destination or *telos* is the blessed state of adoption into the Sonship of Christ, and our present purpose is to know and to appropriate by faith the fullness of that blessing. St Paul assures us:

For in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ (Col. 2:9).

Let us meditate upon, believe in and be blessed by that fullness.

The Fullness of Christ's Sonship

Those scriptures which express the fullness of the relationship between the Father and the Son have been well rehearsed in previous Pastors' Schools. For example:

The Blessing of Destination of Adoption

The Father loves the Son and has given everything into his hands (John 3:35).

But the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me (John 14:31).

No one has ever seen God but God the Only Begotten, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known (John 1:18).

I and the Father are one (John 10:30).

It is clear that there is not the slightest vestige of deficiency in the love, trust, mutuality, blessing, intimacy, service, purpose and authority that exist in this relationship. The sonship that the Son enjoys as the only begotten Son of the Father is in itself the ultimate totality or fullness of eternal blessing. This is Sonship. There is no other.

The Fullness of Our Adoption

The Ascension of Christ is the Father's dramatic enactment of our adoption as children of God, for in Christ our human flesh is seated at God's right hand.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6).

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 mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1–3).

John Bakewell celebrates our adoption in his Ascension hymn:

Jesus, hail! enthroned in glory,
there for ever to abide;
all the heavenly hosts adore thee,
seated at thy Father's side:
there for sinners thou art pleading,
there thou dost our place prepare,
ever for us interceding
till in glory we appear.¹

Our adoption into the Sonship of Christ is expressed in the New Testament in many ways, and each has the characteristic of a 100% fullness or totality:

- the fullness of being *in Christ* (Eph. 1:3).
- the fullness of *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Col. 1:27).
- the fullness of redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7).
- the fullness of deliverance and transference (Col. 1:13).
- the fullness of death to sin, and resurrection to newness of life with Christ (Rom. 6:3–11).
- the fullness of the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15–16).
- the fullness of being conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:28–33).
- the fullness of co-inheritance with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
- the fullness of being destined to be holy and blameless before God (Eph. 1:4).

¹ *Australian Hymn Book*, no. 295, v. 3.

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– the fullness of:

‘a multitude . . . from every nation, tribe, people and language’ (Rev. 7:9).
inherited by Messiah (Ps. 2:8).
adorned as his bride (Rev. 21:2).
brought under one head (Eph. 1:10).
and made one with God (John 17:20–23).
in the true worship offered by his Son (Heb. 9:11–20).

– the fullness of God being all in all (I Cor. 15:24–28).

To designate Christians as ‘sons of God’ is not to commit an error of non-inclusive language, but to express the believer’s incorporation into the fullness of the Sonship of Christ Jesus.

The Fullness of the Blessing

As we recite the fullness of our adoption into the fullness of Christ’s Sonship, it becomes clear to us that this act of adoption of sinners by God is totally an act of grace. Adoption, by definition, is an action of the one adopting, not of the one adopted.

In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves (Eph. 1:5–6).

. . . and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God . . . For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:8–10).

For one such as I, by nature an aspiring, conspiring, perspiring (and possibly expiring!) personality, this plain fact that our destination of adoption is all of grace is indeed a complete and full blessing.

THE PRESENT BLESSING OF OUR FUTURE DESTINATION

In Romans 8 verses 18–25, Paul expresses our adoption into the Sonship of Christ as a matter of future expectation:

But we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (v. 23).

This adoption, says Paul, is something we wait for in patient hope and certain expectation. He reminds the Galatian believers:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:29).

However, while our adoption into the fullness of Christ’s Sonship finds its completion in a future age, there is nevertheless a fullness of blessing in this present foretaste of our future destination. Hence Paul is able to say to the church in Rome:

I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ (Rom. 15:29).

Geoffrey Bingham comments:

We conclude then that when Paul said ‘I know I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ’, he was not conditioning himself to come in a certain state. He knew that was how he would always come and go . . . Paul—as we—was to suffer many things. Yet he certainly

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arrived in the fullness of the blessing of Christ and preached the kingdom of God to the Jews who came to question him. He was a blessing to all who visited him in his new situation.²

As George Elden Ladd has put it, we live now ‘in the presence of the future’. Because God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, we are able to cry ‘Abba, Father’, knowing in our hearts that we are within the everlasting Covenant of God. We are, then, no longer slaves but sons, and fellow heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:6–7), and the Holy Spirit is to us:

a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession (Eph. 1:14).

As children of God we are assured of the sufficiency of God’s grace even in our weakness (II Cor. 12:9), and the certainty of our hope hastens us on into the likeness of Christ.

But 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 (I John 3:2–3).

FINDING, FOCUSSING AND ‘FAITHING’ THE BLESSING

The way we find, focus and ‘faith’ the full blessing of adoption illustrates well the foundations of our Evangelical Confession:

‘Christ alone, Grace alone, Scripture alone.’

This confessional approach contrasts with the prescriptive method of fundamentalism, which begins with the doctrine of the Bible, and then hammers out its fundamental prescriptions of right doctrine.

All Is of Christ

It is clear that there can be no concept or understanding of adoption or sonship apart from adoption into the Sonship of Christ:

- everything into which we are adopted is the Sonship of Christ;
- everything that is the Sonship of Christ, we are adopted into all of that;
- everything other than the Sonship of Christ, we are adopted into none of that.

Hence St Paul confesses:

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21).

All Is by Grace

Someone has said:

**‘Judgement is getting what you deserve.
Mercy is not getting what you deserve.
Grace is getting what you don’t deserve’.**

Whether this distinction is justified is uncertain. What is valid, however, is the emphasis upon grace as God’s free gift to us of *what we do not deserve*, that is, the full blessing of the Sonship of Christ. In Romans 8:28–33, Paul indicates that, in the giving up of his Son for us all, God intends graciously to give us all things.

² ‘The Fullness of the Blessing of Christ’, Monday Pastors’ Study Group, 6th May, 1996.

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Election, then, is by grace alone; call is by grace alone; justification is by grace alone; and sanctification is by grace alone. Having spoken of our destination of adoption in I Thessalonians 5:23, Paul then affirms:

Faithful is he who calls you, for he will also do it (v. 24).

All Is in Scripture

There is a battle in the Church today for the Word. Which Word are we hearing, believing and trusting? The primary question is not that of the inerrancy of the Scriptures, but of the faithfulness of our covenant God.

The Scriptures are the written statement:
of the faithful promise
of the living Word
of our Covenant God.

The Bible is the inscripturated revelation of the fullness of the blessing of the fullness of adoption into the fullness of the Sonship of Christ. It is to this written revelation that the Spirit bears witness confirming:

things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing,
things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God
for those who love him (I Cor. 2:9–10).

This Word of Christ which is beyond our seeing, hearing or imagining is the Word of election, call, justification and sanctification. It is the Word of adoption, of promise, of grace. It is the Word of Christ:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

GOD'S BEST, OR OURS

The Sadducees were blind to the full blessing of our adoption because they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Mark 12:24). Liberal Christians are totally unimpressed by theology of the kind expressed in this study, regarding it as irrelevant to their present cause. Strangely, however, many evangelical Christians, who hold a high view of the authority and infallibility of Scripture, spend more time defending the Bible than reading and studying it. It is therefore common, among Evangelical believers, to find systems of faith and practice which are something other than, or less than, the full blessing of Christ.

Often we hear people say: 'I'm doing my best!' (We usually say this when we are conscious that our best 'isn't the best'.) However, our best for God is not the focus of the blessing. The fullness of blessing is God's best for us in Christ. Down through the centuries the Holy Spirit has renewed the Church, reclaimed its middle ground and revitalised its mission through the evangelical confession.

Let us pray that the resurgence of evangelical faith in our day will not be just another 'fundamentalist push', but a revival in *'the full blessing of Christ'*:

Only in Scripture (is God's Word, that it is)
only by grace (that we receive)
the full blessing of adoption as sons of God
only in Christ !

STUDY NINE

The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit

(by Ian Pennicook)



Christians, with the advantage of apostolic hindsight, are able to see that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is in reality Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are, then, both able and obliged to understand that the blessing of God which is given is essentially the Triune God himself coming to creation and to Man. It is out of the definitive revelation which has come in the person of Christ that we are to see that, however the Old Testament language may only vaguely state it,¹ the Holy Spirit was always the agent by which the blessing of the Triune God has come.

So it is that we understand that the creational blessing is continually communicated through the Holy Spirit. The breath/wind/spirit of God which blew ‘at hurricane force’² over the face of the waters, although not described in personal terms at that point, was none other than the one who is later described as the one who may be grieved (Eph. 4:30), and who intercedes for us ‘with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom. 8:26), yet whose mind, at the same time, is clearly focussed on the will of God (Rom. 8:27). The creation exists when God sends forth this Spirit (Ps. 104:30; cf. 33:6).

¹ By this I mean that the revelation of God in the Old Testament does not come as overtly trinitarian. Until the incarnation, no believer in Israel would have concluded that God was Trinity. For example, Philo, the first century A.D. Jewish philosopher and theologian, argued that the words ‘Let *us* make Man . . .’ were an indication that God, whom he calls ‘the Father of the universe’, was including the angels in his action of creating man. Philo’s reasoning for this is overwhelming: ‘When God created the plants and the irrational animals, which are devoid of vice because devoid of mind and reason, he did so alone, but when he created Man he said “Let *us* make man”, which expression shows an assumption of other beings to himself as assistants, in order that God, the governor of all things, might have all the blameless intentions and actions of man, when he does right attributed to him; and that his other assistants might bear the imputations of his [i.e. man’s] contrary actions’ (‘On the Creation’, XXIV, 75, in C. D. Yonge [trans.], *The Works of Philo*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1993, p. 11).

² G. C. Bingham, *The Day of the Spirit* (Blackwood, NCPI, 1985), p 15.

The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit

What we know of ‘Providence’, God’s sustaining his creation and bringing it to the goal he has set, is in terms of the way the Holy Spirit is in action. Thus the Psalmist wrote:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:24–30).

We are surely to understand by this that ‘their breath’ (v. 29, Heb. *rucham*) is none other than ‘your spirit’ (v. 30, Heb. *ruach*) which has been and is constantly supplied to the creation. It is perhaps notable that when God came to Adam and Eve after their sin, he did so in ‘the cool of the day’ (*RSV*), or ‘the time of the evening breeze’ (*NRSV*), and that the word for ‘cool’ or ‘breeze’ is *ruach*. Rather than the focus being on the time of God’s appearing, the attention is on the wind of God’s presence. Of Genesis 3:8, Calvin says:

I do not doubt that some notable symbol of the presence of God was in that gentle breeze . . . Therefore, Moses, in here mentioning the wind, intimates (according to my judgment) that some unwonted and remarkable symbol of the Divine presence was put forth which should vehemently affect the minds of our first parents.³

In the light of Genesis 1:2, the only previous use of *ruach*, why should we not suspect that the wind which brought creation into being was God’s presence, and that that presence is still there, even after there is sin in creation. God continues to come to the creation by his breath/wind/spirit.

It is when Man is considered that the presence of God to him is described as being by the *ruach*. When he is yet inanimate dust, God ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath [Heb. *n^eshamah*] of life; and the man became a living being’ (Gen. 2:7). The word *ruach* is not used here, but elsewhere it is plain that the biblical writers understood that it was indeed the *ruach* of God which was the controlling factor. Thus, Ecclesiastes 3:21, ‘Who knows whether the human spirit [*ruach*] goes upward and the spirit [*ruach*] of animals goes downward to the earth?’; and Job says ‘my breath [*n^eshamah*] is in me and the spirit [*ruach*] of God is in my nostrils’ (27:3); and later his adviser Elihu says, ‘The spirit [*ruach*] of God has made me, and the breath [*n^eshamah*] of the almighty gives me life’ (33:4).

The blessing of God is that Man is created in complete union with the Triune God. He lives as a ‘living being’ because he is qualitatively different from the animal world.

³ J. Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Geneva Series, Banner of Truth, London, 1965), p. 161.

His life has come because God has blown his own Spirit into Man and, we may add, continues to sustain him the same way. Man 'lives and moves and has his being' not merely *from* God, but *in* him.

It is this which highlights the devastating nature of the Fall of Man. His mortality, in contrast to the previous possibility of eating of the tree of life and living forever (Gen. 3:22), lies in being 'sent forth from the garden of Eden' (3:23), cut off from the tree of life. Genesis 6:3 describes the curse, 'My spirit [*ruach*] shall not abide in man forever . . .'. God's presence is still there, but death lies at the end. Cain's fear, 'my punishment is greater than I can bear . . . I shall be hidden from your face . . . and anyone who meets me may kill me' (Gen. 4:13f.), implied the same thing. To be cut off from God's face was to be liable to death.

Two elements emerge from the Old Testament account of Israel's history. The first is that God's presence by his wind/breath/spirit was continuous, not in contradiction to the curse, but in fulfilment of the eternal purpose which cannot be frustrated. This is seen in Exodus 31:3 and 35:31, where Bezalel is described as 'filled with the spirit of God' so that the tent of meeting may be completed in a fitting manner; and Numbers 11:17ff. indicates that Moses functions as leader because the Spirit of God is upon him and that the elders must be and will be filled in a similar way. The judges, leaders and prophets are men filled with the Spirit of God in order to carry out their particular tasks (see Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; etc; I Sam. 10:6; 16:13; Ezek. 2:2, 12, 14, 24; etc). Micah declared:

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin (Micah 3:8).

Secondly, what is conspicuously lacking in these statements is the notion that any of these people has had his immortality restored. The *ruach* of God will still not abide in them forever. Whether sinner or saint, all will end up in the same situation:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (Eccles. 9:10).

It has been observed that within the Old Testament, apart from Daniel 12:2 and 13, there is no specified idea of immortality or life after death.⁴ Yet perhaps there is another way of looking at that issue; namely, through the various prophetic promises which point to the future action of God. For example, Isaiah 11:1–3 looks forward to the appearance of the shoot from the stump of Jesse, that is, to the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, and does so in terms of one on whom the Spirit of the Lord shall rest. Isaiah 32 has a similar theme; a king reigning in righteousness, though only after a terrible judgment which will lead to 'a [the] spirit from on high [being] poured out on us' (v. 15). Isaiah 44:3 promises 'Jacob' that refreshment will come as God pours out his Spirit and his blessing.

It is in Ezekiel that there is the great promise of the transformation, when those under judgment will receive a new spirit (36:26), which is nothing less than God's own Spirit (36:27). In the following chapter (37), Ezekiel recounts the vision of the valley of

⁴ Uncertainty concerning the date of the Book of Daniel should make us hesitant to build an Old Testament doctrine of resurrection upon these verses. At least, it makes me hesitant.

dry bones, where Israel (v. 11) is restored to life. The breath of God comes and the dry bones are powerfully revived (v. 14). Zechariah promises that the great transformation would take place, ‘not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts’ (4:6).

The great promise of Joel 2:28–32 is significant because it is this prophetic word which Peter sees as the explanation of all that has taken place on the day of Pentecost:

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

We may ask why this promise is given. Are there not already prophets in Israel? Are there believers in Israel in whom the Spirit of God has not been working? Or is the emphasis on ‘all flesh’? Is Joel promising that both Israel *and* the nations will receive the Spirit. In the light of Isaiah 2:2–4 this latter question should surely be answered in the affirmative. But also in the light of Isaiah 2:2–4 we may suggest that Joel is promising that and far more. Isaiah is anticipating the total transformation of the nations. Joel is seeing that the gift of the Spirit is related to the shaking of creation itself (cf. Hag. 2:6–7).

If this latter is the case, then the promise of the Spirit is not merely a promise with local, ecclesiastical significance, but the promise of a renewed creation.⁵ What God did for Adam when he breathed into him the breath of life, he will do again. Adam—Man—will again know the intimacy of the Spirit of God, that is, Man will once more know his full humanity within the blessing of creation.

The Gospel of John, I believe, demonstrates this. In many ways the Gospel leads us to a climax and no less in the way the Holy Spirit is described. The Gospel commences with what is regarded as a deliberate reference to the creation account in Genesis 1:1, ‘In the beginning . . .’, and affirms, as does Genesis, that it was the Word by which all came into being. The ‘prologue’ is followed immediately by the account of the ministry of John the Baptist who:

declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.’ And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” ’ (John 1:29–33).

The word used by Isaiah for ‘rest’ in Isaiah 11:2 (LXX, ἀναπαύσεται, *anapausetai*) is different from that used by John (‘remain’ is μένω, *meno*), but the import is the same; Jesus is the one of whom Isaiah prophesied (cf. Isa. 42:1, ‘I have put my spirit upon him’, LXX, ἔδωκα τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐπ’ αὐτόν, ‘I gave my spirit upon him’, with

⁵ It goes without saying that, if this is the case, those churches which place so much emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit may, in fact, be *understating* the significance of all they claim.

John 3:34, οὐ γὰρ ἐκ μέτρου δίδωσιν τὸ πνεῦμα, ‘he gives the Spirit without measure’). As the shoot from the stump of Jesse, Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

To Nicodemus, Jesus indicated that the restoration of the kingdom depended upon that very thing, that is, the great transforming work of the Holy Spirit: ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit’ (John 3:5, see vv. 6–8). Later in the same chapter, John indicates that, in giving the Spirit without measure to Jesus, the Father has given all things into his hands (John 3:34–35).⁶ The ‘all things’ represents the Greek πάντα (*panta*, neuter plural) and agrees with John 6:37, ‘Everything [πάν, *pan*, neuter singular] the Father gives me...’. Later, in Colossians 1:16, Paul wrote that ‘all things [τὰ πάντα] have been created through him and for him’. We may conclude here that the gift of the Spirit upon Jesus is with a view to him baptising with the Spirit which, in turn, is with a view to him receiving the whole creation.

The promise of John 7:37–39 is prominent:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

While this is not a direct quote from ‘the scriptures’, it is not hard to see the implications of Jesus’ words. The appeal to the thirsty recalls Isaiah 55:1, which is in the context of the application of the everlasting covenant of God’s ‘steadfast, sure love for David’ (Isa. 55:3), which in its turn is in the context of the sure word of God and the restoration of creation (Isa. 55:10–13). Likewise, the reference to streams of living water recalls the vision of Ezekiel, where the restored Jerusalem becomes a source of restoration of the barren land and of healing (Ezek. 47:1–12; cf. Rev. 22:2, ‘the healing of the nations’). I am suggesting that this promise also links the giving of the Spirit with the restoration of creation, however much there may be a particular application for believers.

In the upper room discourse Jesus again promises to send the Spirit, but in doing so he identifies the presence of the Spirit with his own presence and the presence of the Father. While we may legitimately understand this promise as coming to each believer personally, in the light of what I observed above about the nature of Man and the presence of the Spirit of God, we must surely wonder whether the coming of the Triune God to the believers is not primarily to be understood in terms of the restoration of Man to his created being and function.

In John 7:39 we are told that the Spirit was not yet given for Jesus was not yet glorified. When we examine John 20, however, we are faced with Jesus ‘giving’ the Spirit to the disciples. Although Jesus does say to Mary Magdalene, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’ (John 20:17), the giving of the Spirit is presented as being the personal action of the risen, present Jesus:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you’. After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the

⁶ For the Father’s giving to the Son, see also John 5:21–22, 26–27, 36; 6:37, 39; etc.

Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (John 20:19–23).

This climactic giving of the Spirit I take to be John's account of Pentecost.⁷ From within the framework of the Gospel there is no doubt that this is the moment which has been anticipated since the announcement by John the Baptist. More than that, the language used to describe the giving of the Spirit, namely, 'he breathed on them', is directly reminiscent of the account of the creation of Man in Genesis 2:7. There the LXX reads *καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς*, 'and he breathed into his face the breath of life'; John has *καὶ τοῦτο ἐπὼν ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς, Λάβετε πνεῦμα ἅγιον*, 'and saying this he breathed and said, "Receive [the] Holy Spirit"'. The fact that Genesis does not use 'spirit' here has already been dealt with; the common feature is that both accounts describe the action with the word 'breathed' (*ἐνεφύσησεν*) and it is this, I contend, that demonstrates that, when Jesus breathed the Spirit into the disciples, John intends us to see it as the act of re-creation. This is what was done in the first creation, was lost at the Fall and which the prophets had anticipated would be re-done. The 'in the beginning' of John 1:1, therefore, assumes an even greater significance.

If, then, this is the significance of the gift of the Spirit, not only for John but also for the whole of the New Testament, we are able to see that what is described in the Book of Acts is quite staggering. The gift of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was of more than local significance. In that giving, the blessing of God had been restored, and from that giving men and women moved out in the fullness of the blessing. As those 'in Christ', as a result of the gift of the Spirit, they and we are 'a new creation' (II Cor. 5:17). Paul's comment that we are those 'on whom the ends of the ages have come' (I Cor. 10:11) shows that he, too, intended us to see that we are standing at the climax of the purpose of God. To receive the Spirit and to 'go on being filled with the Spirit' is to move out in the fullness of the blessing of the Triune God, functioning consistently with all that he is about in history.

⁷ There are a number of complex problems which arise when the Gospel of John is compared with the Acts of the Apostles, but I suspect that, of all the solutions offered, this is the most satisfactory. Other solutions include (i) that, since *πνεῦμα ἅγιον* is anarthrous, this is not a reference to the personal Holy Spirit; and (ii) that there are, in fact, two impartations of the Holy Spirit, this one preceding and anticipating Pentecost. To (i) I would respond that this is a simplistic approach to the Greek. The presence or absence of the article is first a matter of grammar and not of theology, and *πνεῦμα* lacks the article in a number of places. To (ii) my response is that the overwhelming thrust of John's Gospel leads us to see this giving of the Spirit as a climax, not only of the Gospel but also of the Old Testament promises, so that to attempt to relate it in this way to the Acts is to fail to do justice to the Gospel of John. We should surely begin by treating John and Luke separately. However, the question must remain open.

STUDY TEN

Christ's Fullness & the Church

(by Grant Thorpe)



The Church has no life of her own. As an entity ('something that exists as a separate thing'), the Church does not exist. To see the Church, we must be looking at Christ looking at the Church; and to love the Church, we must be loving Christ loving the Church.

In practical terms, this means that the Church must continually hear the word of its Lord as to its true life. We must pray that God will open up this true understanding to his people. It means that the Church is wholly dependent on her Lord through his word and Spirit to bring life and sustain that life in hope to the end.

John the elder could say that we proclaim the word of life so that others may have fellowship with us—fellowship with the Father and Son (I John 1:3).

Paul says that Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25f.). His laying down of his life was to sanctify her and to effect cleansing. But this is communicated to her in baptism and with the preached word. This means that the mandate to make disciples and baptise is nothing less than Christ giving his fullness to the nations and his drawing believers into that fullness (Eph. 5:26 is based on Ezek. 16:8–14).

FULLNESS OF LIFE FOR US THROUGH CHRIST'S SELF-GIVING

Jesus linked fullness or abundance of life with his being the true Shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:10–16). He linked this also with knowing his sheep and being known by them—as the Father knew the Son and the Son the Father. Clearly, fullness of life arises from the Father, is expressed in the mutual knowing of Father and Son, and is communicated to us by the self-giving of the Son who comes to us as Shepherd. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16).

So the Church participates (has communion or fellowship) in the fullness of Christ.

THE CHURCH'S LIFE IS THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST (EPHESIANS)

In Ephesians (1:18–23), the whole life of the Church derives from Jesus Christ—her hope, her being God's promised possession, and God's power in her. God has raised his Son from death and given him the place above all other authorities for the Church. All that Christ has received, including the place at the right hand of God, he shares with his Church (2:6).

This Christ, being Head over all, has the Church as his Body, so that she is his fullness. This does not suggest deficiency in Christ, but the will of Christ to pour himself out for and into his Church, and for his filling all things to be accomplished in the creation by this action. Apart from Christ who fills all things, the creation remains empty or vain, but through his Church he fills this creation with his fullness.

So it remains Christ who 'fills all things in every way' (Andrew T. Lincoln). The fullness does not transfer to us, but remains the gift of the Father to the Son, and to us in the Son. Therefore the Church cannot take any part of its life—its freedom, or gifts, or the forgiveness it enjoys, or justice, or worship—and utilise them apart from the whole of Christ and the full blessing of God in him. It cannot validly enjoy these gifts apart from reconciliation through his blood and the communion of the Holy Spirit (e.g. the gifts are the working of God, I Cor. 12:6).

This fullness is not something naturally understood, and has to do with the fullness of the love of God. So Paul prayed that we would be strengthened inwardly to comprehend these things, and finally, that we would be 'filled with all the fullness of God' (3:14–19).

This Fulness resides (by the Father's will, yet necessarily,) in the Eternal Son (Col. i:19); and the Son, Incarnate, Sacrificed, and Risen, is so conjoined in spiritual Union to His regenerate Church that what is true of Him is true, within sacred limits, of her. As He without measure is the Fulfilment, or Ideal, of Divine Attributes, so she in measure is the Fulfilment, or Ideal, of Divine Graces; which are, we may venture to say, the Attributes in their reception and manifestation by the regenerate Church. She is the Body through which is realised the Will of the Head, the Fulfilment in which is realised the Grace of the Head.¹

Christ first descended and then ascended that he may fill all things, and this he does by his gifts to his Church (4:7–16) so that the whole Church may grow up into him.

FULLNESS, PRE-EMINENCE, RECONCILIATION & GODHEAD (COLOSSIANS)

Paul explains the fullness of Christ in terms of pre-eminence (1:15–20). Christ has firstborn status (pre-eminence) over creation because all things are in and through and for him, and hold together in him. So God, who is over all, pours his fullness into his

¹ H. C. G. Moule (ed.) in *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians* (Cambridge Bible for Schools & Colleges, Cambridge Uni. Pr., London, 1923) pp. 64f.

Son and, in him, forms the creation. The Son is the fullness of his Father—being the Son of his Father's love (1:13—both as object and expression of his love).

But if there is one other power or dominion anywhere above him, the fullness of the Father in the Son is unfulfilled—because the Lord and Goal of all the Father's purpose in the creation is rivalled.

So, as Head of the Body or Church, Christ is the firstborn from the dead so that he may be pre-eminent in everything. That is, this Christ has invaded the domain of death and conquered it. His pre-eminence in creation for the Church has been secured by his being first also in regard to the 'creation' we tried to have—he became subject to our death (including, then, all sin and pain) and became the firstborn from the dead.

His fullness is the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in him bodily (Col. 2:9–10) and with a view to reconciling all things through his blood.

CONTESTING THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST

It was this that was contested at Colossae, where fullness was offered falsely—through submission to principles of this world (Col. 2:6–23). There is an ontological drive to fullness of life, a filling out of the humanity we have, and great pain where it is absent. Where there is failure to come under the Lordship of Christ—not holding fast to the Head—other dynamics will arise which have an appearance (ceremonial, behavioural, experiential) of giving fullness, but are only shadows of what is real. These need to be contested, particularly with a renewed proclamation of the full Christ.

THE CHURCH'S LIFE

Paul exhorted the Colossian Church to live in this shared life (Col. 3 – 4). They were to set affections, minds and hopes on Christ who was their life. They were to mortify what belonged to this fallen creation because they had put off their old humanity and put on the new which was being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the Creator.

In practice, this meant clothing themselves with all the gracious action of God himself. Their peace was to be the peace of Christ, their word to each other was to be the word of Christ and every deed was to be in the name of the Lord Jesus. Their domestic and social life and proclamation were to be likewise: what is 'fitting in the Lord' and what 'pleases the Lord' and expresses 'reverence for the Lord', because we have 'a Master in heaven'. Clearly, Christ himself is the focus and substance and direction of the life the Church now lives.

By Christ's gift, grace is given to each member of the body—because Christ has defeated all enemies and is now filling all things. The whole body, with its given parts, is to grow up into this fullness of Christ and to do so by 'truing' or speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

STUDY ELEVEN

The Community as Blessing: A Synopsis

(by Noel Cannon)

1

God is community and the entire human race is created to reveal that unity. Geoffrey Bingham in *Christ's People in Today's World* said, 'Fatherhood, sonship and unity are natural to man. They are the basis of the community of man'.

Suggesting that we drop theories of community, he wishes us to look at the new people of God who are free, guiltless, cleansed and loving people, who have died to themselves and can live to God. Living in this state of blessing does not arise from what we do, but what we do arises from living in that state of blessing.

Despite their optimistic hopes, intentional or specialised communities cannot generate the blessing. But they may be the result of living in that blessing. As a church, their prime work remains the responsibility of proclamation and the care of the Church, whilst living in the assurance of the failure of everything that arises from the accursed.

Living as a body with Christ as our Head, living in the fullness of Christ, which fullness Christ has received from the Father; this is true community. This is living in the state of blessing. Obedience is its logical outcome.

The experience of this fullness of Christ began amongst us in the '60s and was to become what someone has called a pilgrimage of relational union with Christ—the One who was made perfect through what He suffered. It is of participation in this pilgrimage that we would speak.

It commenced with the ladies of several Castle Hill denominational churches who met for prayer and Bible study during the Billy Graham Crusade of 1968 and remained in this formation after the Crusade. It was their prayer that God would raise up men who would know God's calling to be leaders in church and family life.

Within the adult Sunday School of our Church, a study of Acts was commenced which came alive. It was God's time for the truth to break in upon us and it did. There began in us that gradual transformation of a body of people into the character of Christ.

At this time the American chapter of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship

International sent to Australia a party of men who were in the midst of the charismatic revival. It included some who were Roman Catholic and others who were from a range of denominations considered to be unsympathetic to modern expressions of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It was to lay a foundation for the inauguration of parachurch organisations associated with the emerging charismatic movement, which made the 1970s the decade of annual charismatic conferences in the capital cities. Among these were speakers who addressed the issue of intentional communities. A number from our Church were to attend the initial conference in Sydney in 1973. This conference would embrace people who spoke of renewal occurring in England and the USA. It was the words of Michael Harper and Kevin Ranaghan which came home to us with the dynamic of a prophetic word—God was calling us into a new way of living.

Meanwhile, our Church having completed an ambitious building project, we now saw that it was ready to give itself to a program to handle the next decades in a fast-expanding urban area. With this in mind, the deacons held a retreat to review and produce a church program. During this weekend, they had a visitation of the Spirit, who called them into repentance and the breaking down of divisive walls among them. He further led them to abandon the former reason for their retreat and to return to the people with no program.

All these actions were rudely shattered by a cultural intrusion from the bikies of the district who, without animosity, began to meet of a Sunday evening on the newly laid-out front lawn of the Church. The Church was ambivalent about any ministry to them. Some, however, went further than the initial coffee shop, and began to open their homes to them. The resultant upheaval in some of these homes, occasioned by their entry, caused the Church to review overseas models who had engaged in this kind of ministry, one of which was the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, Houston, known in Australia for their music ministry in worship. It had been a dying church revitalised by the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Seven hundred of its members formed an international community with extended family households and a growing ministry to illegal Mexican immigrants.

With the intention to move towards a community style of living, an overseas trip to investigate other communities was arranged by a number of our young people. It lasted for six months. The young people saw a range of community lifestyles. But, even more significantly, they saw that they had personal needs in their relationship with God and with each other. These relationships needed God's healing. This was the most profound experience of all. That body of young people saw the bonds of God's love bring them together with a strength that has never faltered to this present day.

The young people returned with an almost identical message to that received by the deacons three years before. If there was to be community, it would be as the outgrowth of what God would do and not what we would plan.

Within a month of their return, Geoffrey Bingham had his first teaching ministry at Redeemer, which started to speak into the lives of all of us. He offered no word of criticism regarding community. He simply allowed the Word of God to do its own work amongst us.

Steadily we were confirmed in the belief that we could not espouse the concept of establishing community as a good idea. Instead, we were being called to a quiet obedience. We would allow God to work the miracle among us. No entrepreneurial endeavour. No grand plans. No overseas models. Just step by step obedience.

Geoff Bingham's ministry would be more than a teaching ministry per se. It would be a prophetic ministry which would give a healthy corrective to potential

inbredness, it would reveal an eldership's true role of a serving leadership, and open up a theology of what Geoff calls 'the big picture'—God coming to us with grace upon grace.

There would have been an extensive period during the '80s when the issue of practicalities of ministry was thought through with many misgivings. There was the issue of pragmatics, or what some would call a ministry relevant to need—'where the rubber hits the road'. Geoff's input into our lives was to be formative in the resolution of these issues. The crossover point was the recognition that the questions could not be 'What' or 'How', but 'Who'.

The degree to which 'cause', or goal, or program still dogged us, despite God's directions from our earliest days, was steadily addressed, and there was a certain aloneness of casting ourselves adrift from the 'growth industry' in church life.

Over the years, we were subject to a range of what we perceived as prophetic directions which were essentially that call to 'be' rather than to 'do'. These specific occasions where God spoke to us were to become for us our 'piled up stones', to remind us that God was alive and speaking to us constantly.

One particular occasion followed the Lausanne Conference when a delegate, David Claydon, brought back a word of the prophet Jeremiah: 'seek the welfare of any city where I have carried you off and pray to the Lord for it; on its welfare your welfare will depend' (Jer. 29:7). The force of the word that night from David Claydon was to bring us to the ordinary everyday affairs of life: building and planting, settling down and being free to do it, marrying and giving in marriage.

There would be other later occasions when we would venture overseas to touch base with large, historic communities who had survived the vicissitudes of the passage of time. Our quest would be to discover whether their survival for centuries was the mark of the continuing vitality of God's fullness amongst them, or the developed and maintained form which institutionalised them without the mark of God's grace.

For us there was to be a falling away of institutional structures. No constitution, no church business meetings, no budget, the Church an unincorporated body of people, and abandonment of the 'safeguard' of democratic voting in favour of unity of intention.

This has all occurred within a growing awareness of the total unity of the Scriptures, with no division or discontinuity between the Testaments, and a unity brought about by a basis in a creational covenant of God that weaves its way through the whole of God's Word. A whole creation that is to be redeemed, as opposed to just chosen sinners, and a deeper understanding of being an eschatological community where God's ultimate kingdom breaks into the present. Sonship and Fatherhood become not simply theological counter to the many failures of so-called healing ministries of a behavioural kind which arose in charismatic renewal, masquerading as spiritual healing.

Unquestionably, there have been radical changes in human thinking which saw the gospel in the twentieth century, particularly, as outmoded. It has led to an indifference or an hostility toward the Church. This has led to a re-evaluation of the expression of the Church, which accounts in part for the community movement in the '70s and '80s. Many were therefore of the 'in order that' variety, rather than the 'because of'. This latter is the blessedness that has come in living in the fullness of Jesus Christ. The search for a New Testament pattern that leads to blessing is futile. But where New Testament power is present, there is the emergence of New Testament patterns.

This has been the unfolding story of our life, which has left us constantly surprised by the joy of God breaking into our lives. Wherever this vitality remains,

The Community as Blessing: A Synopsis

there is little risk of falling into the trap of institutionalism and dead tradition. That is answered by the dynamic of the gospel.

This first session represents the expression of God's blessings coming upon a body of people who live in joyful obedience. The second session seeks to address the only path open to those who are the recipients of the blessing, namely, the passing on of this blessing to others in what we might loosely call 'ministry'.

STUDY 12

The Church's *raison d'être*: The Proclamation of the Gospel

(by Dean Carter)



The Christian church grew out of the apostolic proclamation of the gospel and is alive in the act of proclamation. But the expression 'proclamation' does not reproduce the full breadth of the church's linguistic communication, especially if it is limited to the public discourse of a preacher who is commissioned for the purpose. By the proclamation of the gospel we therefore mean here all expressions of the church and of Christians made through language which have as their content the history of Christ and the freedom of man for the kingdom which that history opens up.¹

Our title is deliberately ambiguous, for it suggests that the existence of the Church is based on the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Church lives to preach that same Gospel of Christ. If the Church does not exist by and for itself, it cannot be interpreted or known in isolation. We are, therefore, bound to begin with God, as the Church's source and goal. This Church is *ek-static*, that is, its life is outside of itself: for through the Spirit it participates in the life of the risen Christ.

However, how could our paltry efforts at lisping the Word of God be that which gives life, hope and substance to the reality which we know to be the Church, the Body of Christ? The reason for our confidence to even consider the matter is our conviction that the answer is to be found in the being of the Trinity itself.

Note: At least two other approaches could be employed to consider this question:

(i) that taken at a previous Pastors' School, by D. Meatheringham, 'The Church of God and Christ Built on the Proclamation,' in *The Church and the Kingdom of God*,

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (SCM: 1977), p. 206.

Pastors' School 1993, (NCTM: 1993), pages 13–16 (which concentrates on Christ's promise to build His Church, as per Matt. 16:13–20, the power and content of the apostolic gospel as exhibited in Acts 2 and 10, and the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom today); and

(ii) a case study of, for example, the Pauline understanding of Gospel, proclamation and community. The trajectories for this latter approach could include: the letter to the Galatians (with a focus on the reception and authority of the Pauline 'gospel'); the First Letter to the Thessalonians (proclamation of the Gospel issuing in community, the link of the Gospel to the 'Word of God' via apostolic oral proclamation, yet with the epistle itself becoming 'Word'); the nature and norm of the Gospel as Christ Himself; the correlation of the vertical and horizontal perspectives; the dynamic of the Gospel to create a new environment and liberate from an idolatrous past; apostolic character and lifestyle as correlate of the Gospel; and how the community of the Gospel participates and contributes to the apostolic 'good news'.

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL AS THE SOURCE OF THE CHURCH

God the Trinity is known, by and in, the mutual communion and communication of holy love, as the Father, Son and Spirit speak with, and to, each other. Further, there is the bi-polar action, of God speaking to the world, of eternity to time and space. This God who speaks enters into loving relationships with His creatures, enabling them to hear, understand, and speak to each other and to their Creator. That is, God created an eloquent creation, one that hears His speech, and answers with praise and proclamation (Ps. 19).

What is true of God is true and basic for humanity: Man is called the *imago Dei*. Humanity, as the male–female unicarnation, was created as a hearing and speaking community: Man is a hearer² and also called *homo loquens*, as the covenant partner to God. Only humanity is addressed as such by God, and who also responds. Behind the human hearing and speaking is the Word of God, which creates Man and so enables Man to hear and answer. Thus this is a given of Man, not merely an ethical expedient. (To fail, neglect or refuse to hear exposes to the judgment, of the Word [Ps. 139:5–12]. Man's rebellion is not in his beastiality, but refusal to heed the revelatory Word [Rom. 1].) The self acquires history through interaction with others. Those who cannot handle this history cannot sustain personal and social relations, which require hearing, heeding and obeying. Finally, from within the Trinitarian freedom, God chooses to adopt and employ modes of revelation which signify Him, without any loss of His mystery, and enable us to respond in doxology and theology.

Next, the Gospel informs us that God and the Word are eternally one, that Word and work are inseparable, that thought and praxis are united, hence where the Word of God is spoken, the will (and praxis) of God is effected: that is, the Word of promise always contains its fulfilment. The Word creates and reveals *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). The Word does not require any pre-existent capability (Rom. 4:17). All that is, is an expression of, and contingent upon, the Word (John 1:1–3). Yet the creation is also contingent upon the work of God, and creation's own ministerial co-operation (see Ps. 33:6, for the creative Word; cf. Ps. 102:26, for the creative hands of God; and Isa. 48:13, for both the word of summons and the divine hands as effecting creation).³

² J. D. Zizioulas, 'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 28 (1975), pp. 401–448.

³ Adrio König, *New and Greater Things* (University of South Africa: 1988), see esp. pp. 13ff.

What is true for the creation at large is true for the people of God. There is a fidelity and unity of redemptive history: creation is *per verbum*, Israel is *per verbum*, and within this context is the promise made to Abraham and Sarah. Adam as created is therefore authentic as he hears and speaks with God (i.e., he lives by the 'word that proceeds from the mouth of God'). In fact, Adam is not known apart from the Word and/or God. Later, God proclaimed the Gospel to Abraham and Sarah (Gal. 3:8), promising the covenant blessing (which included the gift of the Spirit) for all the nations (families) (Gen. 12:1ff.; 15:1–6; 17:1–8). This is seemingly impossible (Sarah is barren, and old), yet both accepted the promise. So, the human act is placed within the context of promise and fulfilment, the Word and its creations. What the Word says and effects, is that which verifies the Word (in its actualising itself, it authenticates itself as the Word—of God).

This same paradigm obtained for Israel in all its history. Under the Covenant, Israel was continually judged for its presumption of human possibilities as the means to secure the fulfilment of God's promises. The Lord continually disowned and judged Israel, with its surrogate schemes and strategies for self-survival. Yet God called Israel to be renewed, together with the Covenant itself. As if from the dead, from barrenness to bounty, Israel returned from exile to prepare for the coming 'Servant of the Lord'. (Where there is a failure to hear, there is a loss of humanity before men, and a man sets himself up as god against God. The opening of the ears is part of the end-time redemption [Isa. 35:5]. The expectation is that the call-Word of God expects an answer, a response [cf. Exod. 19:7ff.; 24:3, 7]: where this is not forthcoming, judgment ensues [Isa. 65:12]. Ear and mouth provide an indispensable link between God and Israel, mankind and God. So Isa. 50:4ff., for the Servant as the prototype for humanity *per se*.)

In summary, the Old Testament affirms us that the Word of God is the form of the Lord's presence, the revelation of His name, the truth, and actualises salvation. It declares the new objective state of affairs, implicates all humanity in the story and action, effects healing and bestows the gift of life, and ushers us into the New Covenant community.⁴

There is a radical division between the divine and human: how is this bridged? By means of the incarnation—of the Word of God. This must resolve and reconcile the problems of integrity, communion and catholicity. The possibility of human hearing, understanding and responding is in the person of Jesus Christ: this Person is both God and God become Man. The true relation of life in others has become human, as His filiality is enfleshed, and becomes ours.

As the incarnate Word of God, Christ hears as the one accountable to God for us all: that is, both revelation and reconciliation are effected in and by Him, for God and Man. Again, God has spoken from on high, having been heard in the depths of human experience (divided and disintegrated, deaf, blind, and mute)—Man has called from the depths and been heard in the highest, 'in Christ'. The Word incarnate is the means for God's call, and Man's response (Isa. 55:11; Heb. 4:12–13). Yet, in the face of God and His Christ, Man executes the defiant, determined and diabolical act to finally silence God at Calvary, to render Jesus and His God dumb and deaf—that is, dead.

However, Christ is raised to new and eternal life, by the glory of the Father and the Spirit of holiness, in fulfilment of the promises of the faithful Covenant God. So, from creation *ex nihilo*, from the impotency of the patriarch, through to the virginal womb of Mary, and the tomb of Jesus, to the climax of the resurrection, the potency,

⁴ J. Firet, *Dynamics in Pastoring* (Eerdmans: 1986), pp. 15–48.

the promissory Word of God is revealed. And revealed, as both God's grace and a judgment that humanity cannot produce its own word, ministry or mission. For the risen Jesus standing outside His tomb does so against all human aspirations, ambitions, antagonism, and advances. Yet His new humanity actually completes humanity, having judged it. To enter this new life requires death and new birth: judgment and new creation. This takes place in the Spirit, and is first seen at Pentecost.

Jesus said, 'I will build my church'. He not only pledges His authority and activity in relation to His Word, but promises His presence and power. That is seen in particular at Pentecost, with the formation of the Church. But before we consider that extraordinary event, we need to give some attention to the Gospel proclaimed.

Jesus had preached the good news of the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:23ff.; following John the Baptist, Luke 3:18). For the apostolic proclamation, evidenced throughout the Acts and the Early Church, the Gospel was the good news of reconciliation, liberation and sanctification. While the content of the Gospel may be concentrated in the simple message of the good news of the presence and power of the kingdom of God, evidenced by the forgiveness of sins, with Jesus acknowledged as universal Lord, it included both word and work, prayer and praxis, as gift and task. For those who responded, it entailed an incarnational community, solidarity with all humanity, with whom Christ has become one by the incarnation, and practical service (James 2:14ff.; I John 3:14–18). (The twentieth century Church has been divided and distressed by the ongoing debate between conservatives and liberals over words and works, personal salvation and social justice, life principles and practical behaviour: see Robert H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* [Eerdmans: 1960], and Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* [Presbyterian & Reformed: 1969]. See, too, the contribution of Berger, on 'another gospel' as the means of apostasy ['Different Gospels: the social sources of apostasy' in *Different Gospels*, ed. A. Walker, (Hodder & Stoughton: 1988), pp. 225–241].)

The 'good news' was first proclaimed in the name of Christ in Jerusalem, by the apostles equipped and empowered by the Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:1ff.; John 16:7ff.; cf. Gen. 11:1–9, for the Babel confusion and refusal to hear):

The Spirit of the Word breaks forth in resurrection eloquence and creates pentecostal communication. Across their Babel-barriers men and women and whole races at last hear and understand each other's tongues, and together sing new songs and mouth a new confession. Above all, cowards hear a call to preach, and are liberated to proclaim, with a boldness unto death, a new *kerygma*.⁵

This *kerygma* formed the Church. The name 'Church' is derived from the Old English term *kirk* (with links to 'Lord's house'). Within the Scripture itself we find the term *ekklesia* employed by Jesus to denote the new people of God (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). The term itself speaks of the 'calling out' of a people, here by God, and their assemblage to hear and heed His Word: such is the meaning given to Israel as the *qahal*, the congregation of God's people, gathered by and to receive His Word. It is this assembling that essentially constitutes the Church—assemblage to worship, with Christ calling and serving His people.⁶

The 'calling into being' of the Church took place at Pentecost (as this festival was itself consummated), with the outpouring of the promised Spirit of Christ, as purifying

⁵ Alan E. Lewis, 'Ecclesia ex Auditu: A Reformed view of the Church as the Community of the Word of God', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 35 (1982), p. 19.

⁶ Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (John Knox Press: 1960), pp. 82ff.

and initiating baptism, and covenant blessing. Like creation at large, and then Israel, the Church is *creatio ex nihilo, per verbum*, and *sui generis*: the Church is the free expression of God, created out of nothing, by means of the Word, and without adequate analogy. The Church is rooted and founded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It was reborn as the Body of Christ by the Spirit, as the sequel to the death and resurrection of Christ.

The Spirit does not take over where Jesus left off, but Jesus Himself returns to be present through the Holy Spirit; His self-testimony and witness continues as the core of the witness of the Holy Spirit. In the baptism, obedience, faithfulness and service to God rendered by Jesus as the Divine Son of the Father, there is a *presentation* of God to the world and the world to God. Following Pentecost, Christ comes in the power of the Spirit to inaugurate a *re-presentation* of God to persons and persons to God. The witness of the Spirit is thus grounded in the objective ministry of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit, 'the Lord, the giver of life', comes with the Word of (Christ's) life, to renew humanity (Rom. 6:23; I John 1:1; Acts 5:20). Such a word is not at the disposal of the Church, nor is the Christ to whom it bears witness: however, the Church is bound to turn to Christ for the Word (John 6:68), and to hold fast to that word (Phil. 2:16). The Church of Pentecost is formed by the Word as the community of Christ by the Holy Spirit, as the fellowship of the Spirit, with its objective basis in the vicarious humanity of Christ, upon which our subjective experience of the Spirit is grounded (II Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1).

Finally, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are regarded as dual aspects or expressions of the one event, that being the intimate and incarnate presence of God in Jesus Christ. The relation between the sacraments is the Word of God as incarnate, inscripturated and proclaimed. The objective reality of the sacraments is located in the actual humanity of Christ as both, and even within, Covenant history and as Head of the Church. In the sacraments, the same Word of the incarnation is re-presented to the Church and humanity.

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL AS THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

The proclamation of the Church speaks of God's reconciling intervention in history in Christ, of which God's Word is the sole reliable and authentic witness. Indeed, the 'Church has found that God makes the *record* of past revelation the *occasion* of present revelation'.⁷ In the conjunction of both the divine and the human in the written word,⁸ the Spirit bears testimony to the Lordship and suffering Servanthood of Jesus the Messiah. This Word is addressed to the Church, and so the world.

Having begun in the Spirit and the Word, the Church must continue in the same (cf. Gal. 3:1–5). The Church has the Word of the Gospel (of the Cross). It is then faced with two unavoidable questions—not merely how, but why preach *this* word? For what is involved is not only *kerygma*, but *kenosis* (self-emptying and self-giving), a readiness in suffering (not merely to say being willing to suffer), accepting societal rejection, and acknowledging ecclesial fragility and fallibility. The schema of the relation between the Gospel, the Church and its mission may be tabulated thus:

⁷ J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (Methuen & Co.: 1957), p. 200.

⁸ See Geoffrey Bromiley, 'The Authority of Scripture' in *New Bible Commentary Revised*, (Inter-Varsity Press: 1970), pp. 3–11, esp. p. 11, 'A Comparison with the Incarnation'.

Gospel <=====> Church <=====> Mission

For Paul the Gospel is the reality of God revealed to him, in the context of his commission to minister to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:11–12, 15–16). The Gospel (I Cor. 15:1–3) is the source of the apostolic mandate to proclaim Christ to the world. Hence, the direction is from the Gospel to mission, with the Church being the dynamic nexus between the two. This means that the mission of the Church is grounded in the Gospel for its authority and action. The Gospel is the means by which the Church actually comes into being, and extends its 'own' life via mission. The Church is not the goal or end result of the Gospel; rather the Church exists as an agent and guardian for the bringing of the Gospel through the mission to the world. Neither the Church nor mission exist apart from the Gospel: the Church is not the final form of the Gospel, nor can the mission sustain itself apart from the life of the Church contingent upon the dynamic fullness of the Gospel.

The Church came into being as the Body of Christ at Pentecost, by the Gospel, as the mission of the Spirit of Christ. Following the original apostles, the Church remains apostolic in its life and purpose by witnessing to the Gospel as Christ's own mission in and to the world.

To lose or compromise the Gospel is to forfeit the Church's apostolicity: so, too, a failure to maintain the mission contradicts apostolicity. Hence, both the Church and mission are governed by the Gospel. That is, the authority, motive, dynamic and content of the mission are determined by the Gospel. Hence, to understand the mission, we are directed back, through the Church, back to its source, the good news of the living Christ. So, for the Church to understand (and so participate in) mission, it must reflect on the Gospel. To do so requires submission to the word of the Scripture, which is itself the apostolic witness to the Gospel (which is the living and incarnate Word, Christ), inspired by the Holy Spirit. The written word is the authoritative and normative canon for the content of the Gospel: the Spirit is the authoritative and energetic power of mission through the Church.

The Church's reflection locates mission in the liberating and reconciling power of the Gospel, rather than its pragmatic self-justification and utilitarian self-promotion. Hence, mission is not a means of survival for the Church, for where it is, it lacks the evangelical character, presence and power of the rule of God. While we may have variations in expressions, forms and structures of the Church, these are determined by the Gospel of Christ, and His mission to the world. Its forms are temporary and provisional.⁹

Given that the *raison d'être* of the Church is Gospel proclamation, what issues are involved in defending and declaring the Gospel? First, the Church must be certain of its identity. The Church only exists in terms of what God says it is: not what it *has*, but what it *hears*. It hears that Christ is its life (Gal. 2:20), so must live with Christ. So the Church teaches as those needing to be taught; comforts as those requiring consolation; corrects as those in need of direction. The Church is a pneumatic congregation, not a fascinated or well-intentioned aggregation: its basis is theological, not sociological (see Forrest's comment about the ministry).¹⁰

⁹ Ronald G. Smith, ed., *The Enduring Gospel* (SCM: 1950), see esp. 'The Gospel in the Church' by Hans Lilje. 'Every single denomination maintains that her only *raison d'être* is what the apostolic *kerygma* has to say about Christ and His Church. How then is it possible that there are so many different types of Christianity which, all of them, claim to be loyal to the Scripture?', pp. 66ff.

¹⁰ J. H. Leckie, ed. *David Forrest DD* (Hodder & Stoughton: 1919); 'the primary duty of every man was to know his own business, and that ministers of the Gospel should aim first of all at being professional theologians

Next, the Church is ever in need of an intercessor–advocate, whether Jesus or the Spirit, due to our own sinfulness and weaknesses. So, see the Church in Revelation 1 – 3, for the reception of the revelation mediated by Trinity (from Father to Son, and then spoken by the Spirit): the Word purges and purifies the Church (cf. Eph. 5:26) throughout dominically ruled history, to the promised consummation and new creation.

Third, the Church's unity centres in Christ by the Spirit, with the Word incarnate realising the unity and reconciliation of Trinity and humanity in Jesus Christ. Fourth, the problem of the Church's lack of empirical 'success' is transcended by God in Christ. For, as Lord, God takes the responsibility for fulfilment and success upon Himself. We affirm His faithfulness, even in spite of the infidelity of the Church. 'The Holy Spirit guarantees the power of life in the Church, the presence of God in the world, and the publicizing of the Gospel. Nothing is left to men, not even to the apostles.'¹¹

Fifth, the Church does not have to rigidly look back to the first century, and seek to remain as a 'New Testament' Church. The Holy Spirit is the presence of the Christ who is coming, as well as of the historical Christ. So the apostolic character of the Church will be more clearly outlined by what Christ wishes the Church to be in the last century (i.e., when Christ actually returns), than in the first century.

Sixth, while certain of the prophets claimed to have speech difficulties (eg. Moses and Jeremiah: see Exod. 4:10; Jer. 1:6), yet were nevertheless faithful servants, so the Church may not disclaim *our* current frailty and poor use of language, for this is the language that God has chosen *to address us*. God's word and Man's word are not mutually exclusive: they are inseparably united in person and work of incarnate Word, eternal Son, Jesus Christ, who exegetes the Father (John 1:18). (See, too, the fact that while the *logos* is offered, it comes to Man in the form of *lalia* [John 8:43]: The *lalia* of Jesus' speech is ambiguous, and while the *logos* employs the *lalia* to present the truth, it is the function of the *lalia* to reveal the *logos* which they serve. The one who speaks is the hidden and humiliated, crucified yet risen, incarnate Word.) As Lewis observes:

even as a communicating fellowship the church exists in Christ, not in itself, and our words are not our own but his. He is the high priest who worships and prays on our behalf, so that we are truly a people of God, speaking corporately to God and as a community to each other, only because the one who has spoken to us continues to speak through us and for us.¹²

Given the radical nature of the Gospel, the Church may even deny the Gospel, especially the cruciality of the Cross. This is symptomatic of a Church which refuses to face scandal, hiddenness, weakness, humiliation, and its nature is exposed by Niebuhr's classic remark: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross'.¹³ Yet, in spite of this failure by the Church as a Gospel-preaching and missionary body, there have been the 'modern' para-church mission ventures.

The Gospel also calls the Church to have done with power, politics and perfectionism, as the Church is tempted to (i) use the world's power, etc. to fulfil its

rather than amateur sociologists', p. 85. What is true for ministers is true for Church. Forrest served on staff of the United Free Church College in Glasgow with James Denney.

¹¹ J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Lutterworth: 1963), p. 90.

¹² Lewis, 'Ecclesia ex Auditu', p. 26. The Church must be alerted to the dangers of using the Bible as a ventriloquist doll, its failure to hear, or fascination in elocution or principles of propaganda without concern for the Gospel message. For the problems of language and preaching, see Kenneth Hamilton, *Words and the Word* (Eerdmans: 1971), and *To Turn from Idols* (Eerdmans: 1973), esp. pp. 183–202.

¹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper Torchbooks: 1957), p. 193.

mandate; or (ii) abandon the world. Jellema also highlights the threefold manner in which conservatives have avoided ethical issues: they have (i) exalted separation from the world, (ii) oversimplified the Gospel, confining salvation to the individual, and (iii) formally repeated the formulations of the past to new questions, showing themselves and their teaching to be irrelevant.¹⁴

Finally, there is a sacramental perspective. The Church sees preaching as sacramental, under the Spirit. Human words signify the object of which they speak, become transparent for the revelation of the hidden Lord of creation, and convey the faith-evoking Word of God (I Thess. 2:13). God takes the risk of His infallible Word of Truth being conveyed by fallible words, and undertakes to guarantee that human words may bear witness to and serve the thought and praxis of God. Again, God faithfully pledges that the two sacraments reliably signify the boundary and bonding of the Church to the Lord of the Church. As Micklem comments:

[the] sacraments are 'acts of God'; they are not *ex opere operantis*; they are the acts of Christ in and through His Church; they are Calvary, as it were, projected into later time and brought personally home to the recipient. They are part of the Gospel; they are the 'story' brought down to our day and including us.¹⁵

We have affirmed that the Church has been formed by the proclamation of the Gospel, and that it only continues its existence as the Church as it continues to proclaim that same Gospel. Our final section concentrates on the fact that Christ Himself continues to proclaim His Gospel, that this preaching is itself part of the redemptive action of Christ, and that, as such, this enables the Church to participate in the ministry of the Gospel to the world.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD—THANKS BE TO GOD

In 'every response to the command and word of God, we participate by the Spirit in the response of Christ himself, who in all the Church's proclamation is the Proclaimer as well as the Proclaimed'.¹⁶

Jesus was conscious of His appointment by His Father (John 3:17; 17:3, 8, 18; 20:21) as His apostle (Heb. 3:1). He bore in His person the very personality and presence of the Father (John 14:7). Jesus' apostleship continued after His death and resurrection, through the members of the Church as gifted by the Holy Spirit, and will only terminate when He 'hands over the kingdom' to God the Father, having completed His commission as the kingdom's Lord (I Cor. 15:23–28). (This stands in contrast to the temporary apostleship of the twelve disciples, which terminated with Jesus' death: as the risen Lord, Jesus commissioned 'new' apostles, including Matthias and Paul [Acts 1:21–26; I Cor. 15:3–10; Gal. 1:11–17].) Christ 'clothed with his gospel' offers His reconciling ministry to humanity, as He continues to preach (Rom. 10:17; Eph. 2:17–18).

In Christ's preaching there is the linking of the original utterance, the time of testimony, and the time of the Church proclamation.¹⁷ He who was contemporaneous

¹⁴ See Dirk Jellema, in Carl Henry, ed., *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Baker: 1968), p. 111.

¹⁵ N. Micklem, *What is the Faith?* (Hodder & Stoughton: 1936), p. 205.

¹⁶ Lewis, 'Kenosis and Kerygma: The Realism and Risk of Preaching' in *Christ in Our Place: Essays Presented to James Torrance*, ed. T. Hart & D. Thimell (Paternoster Press: 1989), p. 76.

¹⁷ See Hermann Diem, 'the whole content of the Gospel message and proclamation flows from the real history of Jesus Christ', in *Dogmatics* (Oliver & Boyd: 1959), p. 132.

with the prophets and apostles is present, to and with us, by the Spirit of prophecy. As Greidanus comments, 'Christ marches on in the Church's proclamation'.¹⁸ This being so, 'the sermon must be a proclamation of the content of the preaching-text and must do justice to the intent of that text. The historical text itself does not moralize and hence should not be used for moralizing. The purpose of historical texts is not to offer us human models for proper conduct but to show the progressive coming of *Christ* in history'.¹⁹ And further, 'as a redemptive event the sermon itself is a moment in the ever *progressing* redemptive history . . . As a redemptive event the sermon stands right in the midst of the eschatological drive of redemptive history. It opens and closes the gates of heaven. It drives history to its consummation'.²⁰

When the Church discerns the significance of its basis and its ministry, especially in the Gospel it proclaims, it is enabled to speak to the world, albeit with fear and trembling (I Cor. 2:1–5; Phil. 2:12–13). As a glad hearer of the Gospel, the Church cannot but speak (II Cor. 4:13). And what is heard in this proclamation? A covenant-creating community summons, its origin lying in the creative formation of Adam, and his faithful preservation, in spite of his defiant and dismissive treatment of the Word of God. It is replicated in the life and ministry of Israel, whose identity is secured and sustained by the revelation, reconciliation and response mediated through the 'Old' Covenant. Its actualisation is in the incarnate, crucified and risen, eternal Word–Son of God, present as God and Man to all creation by the Spirit, and calling humanity to the community of faith which is the Church:

Part and parcel of Christian proclamation therefore is that it discovers God and man already to be together in Jesus Christ. It is addressed and impressed by that. And in that it attempts to say this to all people, it expects of all those so addressed that they will *involve* themselves in this co-existence of God and man. That means that the word which speaks of God expects *faith* of the person addressed. Without involving oneself in this co-existence of God and man, one cannot be part of that co-existence.²¹

CONCLUSION

The work of God in and for creation, completed in the death and resurrection of Christ, is continued through the ministry of the Church in and for the world. The Word of God to and for creation, incarnate, inscripturated and preached, has formed the Church and continues to sustain the Church in its life and ministry.

This is indeed good news. As the liturgy says, 'This is the Gospel of the Lord'. No wonder we respond, with and for humanity and the wider creation, 'Praise to you, Lord Christ.'

Or, as Lewis concludes:

¹⁸ S. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura* (Wedge Publishing Foundation: 1970), p. 155.

¹⁹ Greidanus, *op. cit.*, p. 151. See too, 'The grace of God . . . needs no legal machinery to protect it . . . What is it that makes the Church different from all other societies, that makes the preaching of the Word different from all other speech, that makes the sacramental rites different from all other significant acts? It is grace'. See Bernard Lord Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent* (Independent Press: 1943) pp. 114–5. Further, 'Membership of the Church, fellowship in it, the means of grace which it provides, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, these are not optional accessories of the gospel: these are the gospel', p. 117.

²⁰ Greidanus, *op. cit.*, p. 155, and also cites B. Holwerda: 'only that sermon is up-to-date which is preached in the awareness that the time for preaching becomes shorter with each sermon, in the awareness that every sermon brings the end nearer', from *Een Levende Hoop*, vol. 1 (Boersma: 1953–54) p. 92.

²¹ E. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Eerdmans: 1983), p. 191.

The church has not truly heard the content of God's Word until it has understood, however reluctantly, that its *raison d'être* lies outside its own doors and beyond its own beatitude. It has been called out of the world only to be sent to the world, on whose behalf, in provisional representation, it has been chosen, and whose service alone, through *kerygma* and *diakonia*, it can truly be the Body of the world's redeemer. ²²

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²² Lewis, 'Ecclesia ex Auditū,' p. 27.

STUDY THIRTEEN

Living in the Fullness of the Blessing of Forgiveness

(by John Dunn)



INTRODUCTION

Many Christians do not seem to know God has forgiven their sin. They may have some level of belief that Christ has died for them, but generally speaking they do not have any certainty or clear understanding that they have been cleansed, justified and freed from guilt.

It is my conviction that the vast majority of Christian pastors today rarely, if ever, teach their people about God's total forgiveness. This leads me to one of a number of conclusions:

- (a) The pastor has never really understood the grace of forgiveness.
- (b) The pastor does not believe it to be true or even possible.
- (c) The pastor does not see forgiveness as an essential truth to teach.
- (d) The pastor has once known God's forgiveness, but has lost sight of it.

Men and women need to know God's total forgiveness. A partial forgiveness from God, a grudging forgiveness, a conditional forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness would be useless. These would only tantalise and mock us.¹ Without a realisation of our total forgiveness we would never know where we stood in our relationship with God. When we know we are totally forgiven, then loving God comes as a natural result. On the other hand, if we see God as having only partly or conditionally forgiven our sin, then we will have a difficult time loving Him. If we think forgiveness is contractual, then our attention will be focussed on our failure and guilt, rather than

¹ See Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness* (Evangelical Pr., Hertfordshire, 1979) p. 50.

upon Christ and His free, justifying, cleansing power. The conclusion we will inevitably draw from such a relationship is that God is pleased with us when we don't sin, and angry with us when we do! We will be measuring our relationship with Him by our 'performance' rather than by what Jesus Christ has objectively accomplished for us on that Cross. We will come to think that our pious mode of living—rather than His sacrifice for us—is the measure of our ongoing acceptance by God. As a result, we will set up a program of works (of not sinning and of doing good) in order to gain (or retain) God's favour. Employing this 'do-it-yourself-justification-kit' may well be an unconscious act on our part, but it betrays a false and deficient understanding of God's way of accepting sinners. It would simply prove that we have never really known His wonderful and free forgiveness!

As Pastors, we—of all people—ought to be deeply aware that everything we do and say and think is ultimately related to whether or not we are living in a realised experience of God's total forgiveness. What we must know for ourselves (and be constantly communicating to our people) is that holiness—or right living—comes neither from trying to be good, nor by trying not to be bad. Rather, it comes from seeing that the propitiation of Jesus on that Cross is personal and that it totally—once and for all—deals the death blow to all our sin and guilt and failure and defeat. Such a realisation releases us to *be* holy.

It is imperative that we teach our people and convince them that only the forgiveness of the Cross reaches down into the depths of the human conscience to cleanse from shame and blame; from bitterness and hatred; from anxiety and self-despising. They must know that God's forgiveness touches the deepest levels of our unconscious fears and insecurities, our inferiorities, our damaged emotions, our unresolved conflicts and tensions. It provides the only true base for the resolution of many of our physical and mental disorders. It is able to penetrate the hidden recesses and chambers of our memories and there cleanses and purges totally and permanently.

God's forgiveness is no light thing. We must be thoroughly convinced that the Cross is God's complete answer to the deepest of human needs with respect to Man's relationship with Him as also with others. We must resist being seduced by the world's way of thinking about these matters. We must tell our people that they only come to know God as they enter and live in a realised experience of His total forgiveness, and they only *go on knowing God* as they go on knowing and living in that same experience of liberation. There is no higher, greater or richer experience than to know the wonder of God's love and grace and forgiveness. *We must teach these things over and over to our congregations!*

OUR TRUE ROOTS

When I teach forgiveness I always begin with Genesis chapter 1 and Creation. In order to understand why we are here, what life is meant to be like, and where we are headed, it is essential that we go back to the beginning and see what God's purposes were when He first created us. Open up Genesis 1 and teach people what it means to be in God's image,² what the great vocation was He gave, and how we were intended to be

² When I look in a mirror I see an image of myself. That image is not the 'real me' and never can be. It is only a *reflection* of the real me. What I see in the mirror is a derived likeness. If I move away from the mirror or if the mirror is shattered, my 'image' ceases to be. In a similar sense we have a derived image of God. Of ourselves we are not, and never can be, 'the real thing'—only God can be that. We can never be more than a reflection of what He is. So when the Bible says we have been created 'in God's image', it must mean that we are *like* God in the sense that

functional creatures. Get inside the statement: ‘God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices’ (Eccl. 7:29). Open up Psalm 8 and show what it means for God to have put all things under our feet.

Sadly, because we are fallen creatures we have trouble going back to our origins. We cannot face the shame and guilt attached to our fall, and we do not want to pull the blind up on our past rebellion against God. Even as Christians we have trouble facing our genesis in a thoroughly objective way. But in spite of these handicaps, we need to go back to our roots and understand the incredible moral and spiritual freedom in which, and for which, we were created. When we begin to grasp the grandeur of what we were before the Fall, and when we see what God has done in order to bring us back into that creational glory, then the truth of the Christian Gospel will burst into life—we will begin living in the fullness of the blessing of forgiveness.

THE GENESIS AND EXTENT OF GUILT

We all understand that the Fall was the genesis of human guilt. Our people need to understand this Biblical principle. We are corporately guilty in Adam. The solidarity of the race is such that when he sinned we sinned. When he disobeyed we disobeyed. When he came under guilt so too did we. When he came under God’s wrath so did we. Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 are the two key passages which open this doctrine.

Passages such as Genesis 6:6; Proverbs 5:22; Jeremiah 13:23; 17:9; Mark 7:21–23; and Romans 3:10–18, all show the extent of human sin. Clearly this is not how we see ourselves and it takes a revelation from God to show us how *He* sees us. A prayerful study of Romans 1:18–32 will soon reveal what degree of rebellion and evil is in every one of us *at core*.

FORGIVENESS AND THE CROSS

To most people, the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross is a great mystery. Few understand what happened when He died. Because we are sinners—and are therefore involved in our sins—we find it impossible to fully comprehend what it means for someone else to bear our sins for us.

I see it this way: it must mean that all those elements of sin (such as its guilt) which hold us in their power and which adversely impact our lives were taken up by Jesus on that Cross. It must also mean that all the penalty and judgment and condemnation which our sin deserves were taken by Him. It must also mean that God’s wrath which our sin rightly attracts was absorbed by Jesus on our behalf. It must mean that all our failure to obey God’s righteous law was taken up by Jesus and worked out on that Cross. More than all this, it must mean that *sin itself*—that very principle of sin which permeates our race and our own beings as fallen creatures—was taken by Christ as He suffered as a man for all humanity on that Cross. ‘[God] made him *to be sin*, who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (II Cor. 5:21). Peter tells us that He bore our sins to exhaustion, to extinction, to obliteration—He ‘suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous’ (I Pet. 3:18).

Geoffrey Bingham writes: ‘We cannot escape the fact that [*Jesus*] *actually became*

we reflect His moral character. We mirror-image Him, deriving our existence and true meaning in life entirely from Him.

our evil, although he himself had never committed evil'.³ On the Cross, Jesus took up into Himself all that we are as fallen creatures. He became our sin. He became our guilt. He suffered our shame. He suffered our pollution. He carried our evil. All those things which would burden our conscience Jesus suffered. All that troubles our mind, pierces our heart, haunts our memory, paralyses our will, *He became that*. On the Cross—*Jesus became all that is us*. He became everything that we are as sinners.

We are told in Isaiah that—on the Cross—Jesus was so marred and disfigured that He was not recognisable as truly human. That image of God in Man had totally gone out of sight. Instead, that loathsome being which He became on the Cross was *us imaged in Him*. God had laid on Him, not just the punishment of our sin, *but the sin itself*. All the elements and components of our sin were upon Jesus and were Him. *He was made not only to bear our sin but to be our sin*. It has been said: 'On that Cross God saw us at our worst, and it was on that Cross that He loved us the most'.⁴

TEACHING AND COMMUNICATING FORGIVENESS

Eugene Peterson makes this observation:

If a pastor finds himself resenting his people, getting petulant and haranguing them, that is a sign that he or she has quit thinking of them as sinners who bring 'nothing in themselves of worth' and has secretly invested them with divine attributes of love, strength, compassion, and joy.

He goes on:

If the pastor rigorously defines people as fellow sinners, he or she will be prepared to share grief, shortcomings, pain, failure, and have plenty of time left over to watch for the signs of God's grace operating in this wilderness, and then fill the air with praises for what he discovers. An understanding of people as sinners enables a pastoral ministry to function without anger . . . If people are sinners then pastors can concentrate on talking about God's action in Jesus Christ instead of sitting around lamenting how bad the people are.⁵

Living in forgiveness as well as teaching forgiveness exposes our vulnerability. If we are going to communicate the reality of the blessing of forgiveness, then our people must see us as we really are—warts and all. Otherwise they are unlikely to believe it. They will see forgiveness only as a theory—albeit a very nice one! Of course, forgiveness is a revelation from God—but that revelation may very well be what they see in us. Remember, the only Bible some people will ever read may be us! When we share our failures and weakness with people, and identify personally and directly with them in their failures and weakness, then we are in a position to speak the word of liberation directly to their hearts. They know we *know*! Such transparent sharing bridges all ages.

Bonhoeffer once wrote (in a slightly different context):

He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone . . . The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner.⁶

³ Geoffrey Bingham in *Christ's Cross Over Man's Abyss* (NCPI, Coromandel East, 1994) p. 31.

⁴ Dr David Seamands (Sermon on tape).

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Gift: Reflections on a Christian Ministry* (Marshall Pickering, London, 1995), p. 119.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (SCM Pr., 1976), p. 86.

One of the great blessings of forgiveness is that we are free to be failures. We don't have to pretend to others that we are perfect! In our sharing at Chatswood we have sometimes wept together from the sheer joy of seeing what God has done about our sin. At such times the grace of forgiveness has just swept over us.

WE MUST SEE OURSELVES AS GOD SEES US

How God sees us as believers is how we are to see ourselves. We must, by faith, take Him at His word and trust that when He says we now are 'in Christ' then this is the truth of the matter. We are to walk by faith, not by sight—and certainly not by feeling. What God says about us is reality, irrespective of how we 'feel' and irrespective of what is going on around us in life.

God pronounces believers righteous at the *beginning* of their course, not at the end of it. If He pronounces them righteous at the beginning of their course, it cannot be on the basis of works which they have not yet done . . . I can never be really satisfied that I have made the grade, that my behaviour has been sufficiently meritorious to win the divine approval. Even if I do the best I can (and the trouble is, I do not always do that), how can I be certain that my best comes within measurable distance of God's requirement? I may hope, but I can never be sure. But if God in sheer grace assures me of His acceptance in advance, and I gladly embrace His assurance, then I can go on to do His will without always worrying whether I am doing it adequately or not. In fact, to the end of the chapter I shall be an 'unprofitable servant', but I know whom I have believed.⁷

Forgiveness, justification, righteousness, blamelessness, guiltlessness—these are all of the one bundle, and flow from the Cross and the finished work of Christ.

We Have Been Justified & Are Righteous in His Sight (Rom. 3:22–24; II Cor. 5:21)

Justification is a legal standing. We are no longer under the indictment of the law. We have been accounted righteous. Luther said:

Wearied at length . . . with your own righteousness, rejoice and confide in the righteousness of Christ. Learn, my dear brother, to know Christ, and Christ crucified, and learn to despair of thyself, and to sing to the Lord this song:—'Lord Jesus! Thou art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken what belonged to me; Thou hast given me what was Thine. Thou becamest what Thou wert not, in order that I might become what I was not myself'.⁸

Although it is a legal standing, there is a colossal dynamic in justification—it is at the heart of all that God has done for us in Christ.

We Are Entirely Forgiven by Him (Rom. 4:7–8; Col. 1:14)

How little we seem to understand and take up what it means to have a conscience that is tranquil and at rest before God because of His forgiveness. Forgiveness goes

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (IVP, Leicester, 1994), pp. 97–98.

⁸ Martin Luther, quoted by Haldane, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), p. 172.

hand-in-hand with our no-condemnation status. It flows out of our justification. Because we are justified we are forgiven. It is because our guilt has not been put to our account (i.e. we have been justified) that we are forgiven. Reconciliation has been effected at the Cross. We are to take up that peace and live in it (Rom. 5:1).

**We Are No Longer under Condemnation
(Rom. 8:1, 33)**

Most people live constantly with a sense of accusation hanging over them. We feel inferior because others seem to cope better than we do. We accuse ourselves of being failures. Our conscience is always nagging. It has been said: 'A guilty conscience is the seasoning of our daily life'.⁹ Satan himself never lets up in his lying accusations. But if the Judge of all the earth justifies us, who then can bring any legitimate accusation against us? 'When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look, and see Him there who made an end of all my sin'.¹⁰ That's that!

**We Are Guiltless in His Sight
(I Cor. 1:8)**

Radical change in my life came when I was shown from Scripture that there was no longer any guilt hanging over me. Transformation in the lives of the folk I teach usually comes when they discover this same great truth.

**We Are Holy, Blameless, Pure & Irreproachable
(Eph. 1:4; I Thess. 5:23; Phil. 1:10; Col. 1:22)**

Every day our 'no condemnation' standing before God is being contested. We often have a hard time living in the realisation that we are holy, blameless, pure and irreproachable in God's eyes. Of course this is never what we are in our own right, but is entirely due to Christ—our representative—and it is only ever by virtue of our union with Him. We are in Him, so, what He is—*that is what we are*.

**We Have Died to Sin & Are Alive to God in Christ
(Rom. 6:11)**

Christ has died and has been raised. The life He now lives, He 'lives to God'. We must count or reckon upon the fact that we too have died and have been raised 'in Him'. This reckoning is not a work. It is not something that we have to do in order to make it so. We are to rest in it. Luther said: 'Faith is not a work, it is a resting in what God *has done*'. We are to count on the fact that God views us as having died with Christ and are thus guiltless and blameless. We are to believe this great truth and rest the whole weight of our confidence upon it.

One of the problems many Christians face is they think they have to *perform* in order to remain in God's good books! We keep falling into the trap of believing that God only accepts us when we are doing the right thing. He smiles on us when we are obeying and threatens us when we are not! However, we must see that irrespective of

⁹ Dr Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1969), p. 10.

¹⁰ Hymn by Charitie Lees Bancroft.

what we feel, or think we are experiencing (even of failure), or whether or not we seem to be what we think we should be, God's attitude towards us does not alter. God accepts us entirely because of what Christ has done, not because of, or on account of, *our* performance. He tells us we are new creatures in Christ. He says we are in Christ. He says that we have died with Christ. He says we are now alive with Christ. He says we are now citizens of heaven. All this has occurred independently of our *performance*. It is all due to God's grace.

The gospel does not command us to *do* anything in order to obtain life, but *it bids us live by that which another has done*; and the knowledge of its life-giving truth is not labour but *rest*—rest of soul—rest which is the root of all true labour; for in receiving Christ we do not work in order to rest, but we rest in order to work. In believing, we cease to work *for* pardon, in order that we may work *from* it; and what incentive to work, as well as joy in working, can be greater than an ascertained and realized forgiveness?¹¹

**Our Life Is Hid with Christ; As He Is, So Are We;
We Are in Heaven Now
(Col. 3:3; I John 4:17; Eph. 2:6)**

When we look to that Cross in faith, the overwhelming conclusion we must come to is that as the Son is guiltless before the Father, so too are we—because we are in Him. The Son is perfectly righteous, so too are we—because we are in Him. The Son is totally accepted by the Father, so too are we—because we are in Him. Because there is no judgment hanging over Him, so there is no longer any judgment hanging over us. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus*' (Rom. 8:1). Though we are yet to 'arrive' in glory, in another very real sense, we are there already! From the Father's point of view it is all completed. We are already in heaven!

Meantime, in the here and now, we are free to live in the fullness of the blessing of total forgiveness!

¹¹ Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness* (Evangelical Pr., Hertfordshire, 1979), pp. 24–25.

STUDY FOURTEEN

The Blessing of the Community: A Synopsis

(by Noel Cannon)



Geoffrey Bingham captured the sense of the community of the church in the poem that bears the simple title 'Community'. It was written on a return flight from a week's teaching with us in Castle Hill.

It contains an awareness of the love of being and living together for the right reasons. Its healthiest expression is its desire to be marked by a life of reality. For us, this reality expresses the emphasis of this second topic, 'The Blessing of the Community'—the way we pass on this blessing we receive in its fullness to others.

Failure to live in the fullness of the blessing inevitably leads in community to a ministry driven life, what we might call 'a contingency ministry'—ambulances at the bottoms of cliffs, fence builders at the tops.

We constantly address this trap that can ensnare us, yet acknowledge Geoff's perception of our ministries which penetrate the world. This penetration is vital to our health as part of the Body of Christ.

Overseas experiences have enabled us to see the manner in which communities become misshapen by a 'cause' mentality, often with 'victim' symptoms and a 'justice men and the great rage' bitterness.

We have learnt over the years when to say 'yes' or 'no' and not to be driven by urgencies. Yet some of the lives of those people whom God brought to us were littered with the wreckage of depravity. It was for us to perceive by God's grace the nobility of each of them.

Our earliest years were attended by the warmest citations from government agencies. Yet there came the day when one of these came unstuck and God changed the direction of our ministry simply, swiftly, certainly.

This was for us the cue to commence our ministry in the School. There were a series of circumstances that allowed for the fabric of a school to eventually emerge in a leased church building, and later in a large provision in a well-known children's home

complex—Burnside. Though the site served us superbly, the denominational owners provided us with little long term hope of ever owning the site.

To cover the various activities of the Church, a number of ministry entities have been devised to see that each is dealt with appropriately. These services provide opportunity for some of our most needy people to have rehabilitation employment. Reskilling and further study then enhances competency. Each of the services engage in serving the public domain as well as providing a service to our Church and School needs.

There have been the purchases of specific properties, in particular a heritage item, 'Castle Hill House' in the precinct of 'Darcey Hey'. The building dates back to the 1840s. It was bought in a barely salvageable condition after being ravaged by fire. Its restoration has created an impact on the district, opening up to the wider community the nature of our life together. It has attracted immense craftsmanship support from people whose care of us is beyond the boundaries of contractual agreements.

Castle Hill House was purchased because, independently, three families sold their homes and placed their resources from the proceeds of the sales before the Body. There were to be additional grants from the Government due to the nature of the submission placed before them. Open days, where the Church serves the local district, are a vital expression of the grace the Lord affords to all people—believers and unbelievers.

The leasing agreement for Burnside as the School site had fallen within the financial capabilities of the School. Suddenly, despite all that they had previously said, the denominational board offered us the School site to purchase—naming a multi-million dollar figure. Then began the process of, firstly, ascertaining whether we should purchase—we had been praying for such a reversal for many years and now it was before us. By a series of opportunities, we saw all but the final payment covered—a large portion as a loan by the vendor and a section of it by gifts from within the fellowship. The last payment eluded us right down to the wire when, after promising and renegeing several times, a leading Bank accepted our proposition—the sale of all of our homes and the resiting of the fellowship dwellings down on the school site.

Prior to these negotiations, I was diagnosed as having bowel cancer. It was a poor long-term prognosis. The Church met daily in prayer, initially for my recovery, and then for the leading of God with regard to the purchase of the leased property.

The proposal put to the Bank was the result of the Church meeting together one Saturday, and allowing the will of God to emerge as people without a vote arrived at a consensus to purchase.

There are many individual examples of students who have been blessed with eternal truth discovered initially in the ministry of the School. There have been a considerable number of instances where students—grounded in faith during their time in the School—have returned overseas and are now meeting together on a regular basis for prayer and Bible study. Some have been brought to faith in the years after leaving School.

Some have written testimonies to the grace of God, during and after their time in the School, which have been part of the newsletters that we regularly distribute to parents. Many maintain written, faxed or telephone contact with us—years after they have left the School.

Geoff refers regularly to the solidarity we possess with all of humanity. This is a strong perception of those who serve us with trade skills. They come as contractors, and remain in active fellowship with us long after their contractual relationship is exhausted.

Ministry can take its toll, despite all of the hopes and aspirations that it be

different. There is a mystery of the unexplained—such as the young man who comes from one of the toughest areas of suburban Sydney, gives one of our families a torrid time, then flees to burn down a series of public schools. He goes through the same distressing scene, as had occurred with us, in a number of other caring homes. He finds the Lord and commences to visit each person who has cared for him to seek forgiveness—and dies shortly after leaving us to drive up-country to apologise to a man of God who had been on the receiving end of his tirades. God is sovereign.

The younger generation are subject to enormous societal pressures, particularly from their peer groups. Yet God has granted us a continuous stream of young people who are obedient in joy when God speaks. There would be appropriate occasions in an appropriate way where forgiveness and reconciliation is sought and given. There is the constant healing that streams from such actions.

C. S. Lewis, writing in *The Great Divorce*, describes hell as an ever-expanding suburb where, as soon as friction occurs to anyone, that person establishes his dwelling further away. Such distancing allows for personal pursuits without being inhibited. The story portrays graphically the meaninglessness of it all. But there is a 'bind'—the inability to escape from the imperative of the self-striving to execute his own choice, regardless of those to whom he is related.

Gathered individuals can so easily be a collection of self-interested people who gather to serve their own interests in association with other individuals. It is what Gunton calls 'disengagement': from God, from other humans in the world, between brothers and sisters in the Church.

So easily do we, as Francis Schaeffer says, catch our cultural assumptions 'like the measles'. It is God who exposes these assumptions to the challenge of His Word. That was the challenge of the preacher in Ecclesiastes—challenging his culture's practical atheism, 'living under the sun'. God brings us through the disillusionment of the vanity of it all to an affirmation of the significance of each moment.

To perceive that our individualism denies the doctrine of creation and the Church is to leave us free to discover the Church as the community of God.

In recent days, we have sought from our people a recollection of God's speaking into our lives—a recounting of our salvation history like the psalmists of old. It has had a powerful effect as we have recalled our obedience in response to God's Word.

We are deeply conscious that, appropriately, it is 'Our Story'. We do not foist it on others. Ultimately, we are at this moment what we are because of the manifestation of God's life amongst us. We join the rich lineage of those who have been the men and women of faith, coming into it through the same door as Abraham. Amidst our disappointments and failures, we have sometimes been tempted to look at our neighbours in what we momentarily perceive as the comfortable isolation of their self-directed lives. We perceive the ease with which we, like Peter, can say, 'I go a-fishing'. But, also like Peter, we know that life can never be the same again. We have been overcome by His love and His mercy and His purpose for unity—overcome, that is, by Christ Himself. As His children, it cannot be any other way.

STUDY FIFTEEN

Christ's Eschatological Fullness

(by Ian Pennicook)



When writing to the Ephesians, Paul wrote that ‘the church . . . is [Christ’s] body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (1:22–23). Apart from the church, Christ has no fullness. This is not the result of any deficiency in Christ; rather it relates to the overall purpose of God, the understanding of which underlies the whole approach which Paul takes in this letter. His depiction of the church presents us with a vivid picture of the new humanity formed ‘in Christ’, and it is from this that we see Paul’s meaning of the church as Christ’s fullness.

We should note that Paul elsewhere describes the church as Christ’s body on a number of occasions.¹ Within I Corinthians the language is used in the context of the discussion of liberty and the requirement for discipline in chapter 10. There he writes:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (I Cor. 10:16–17).

Participation in Christ means that we are one body (‘for [ga;r, gar] we all partake’). The implications of ‘one body’ are mentioned in chapter 11 when the matter of the Lord’s supper is prominent. There he writes:

For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves (I Cor. 11:29).

More detailed information appears in I Corinthians 12:12–13 and 27:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one

¹ We observe that in Romans 12:4–5 the language used is not indicating ‘the body of Christ’ but ‘one body in Christ’.

body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

While the purpose of these statements is basically practical, namely, to deal with the issues of divisiveness which so dominate this letter, underlying his solution is the recognition that when people came to Christ, confessing him as Lord, it was because the Holy Spirit had enabled them to do so (I Cor. 12:3). So, then, the variety of gifts which the Corinthians currently experienced in their life and worship were to be understood, not as a matter of their own choice or ability, but as the gifts of Christ and so as manifestations of the Spirit of Christ (vv. 4–11). The reason is simple, yet important; the gifts must not be occasions for division, if for no other reason than that in *one* Spirit believers have been baptised into *one* body, the body of Christ.

If I may refer back to the Study, 'The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit', I suggested there that the gift of the Spirit, by which the Triune God has come to us, is nothing less than the climax of Old Testament hope.² What the New Testament adds to the picture is the understanding that our present experience of the Spirit has a conditional element to it, namely that we now walk by faith and not by sight; but if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation nonetheless. If that is so, then we would say that when the Spirit comes upon a person, he or she is immersed in the Spirit, overwhelmed by the Spirit, with the result that he or she is now intimately united to Christ, as body to head. That would mean that the climax of history is to be found in that intimacy. What was lost in the Fall is now restored, but in a way which the story of Genesis could only hint at.

It is this conditional element which is addressed in Ephesians, where Paul's most frequent usage of 'the body', as a reference to the church, occurs.³ When Paul wrote that the church is Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills all in all, he did so after stating that the choice before the foundation of the world (1:4) was in terms of 'the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up⁴ all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (1:9–10). To that extent the gift of the promised Holy Spirit is a 'seal' (σφραγίζω, *sphragizo*, 'I seal, as a certification') and not the final goal (1:13); he is the 'pledge [ἀρραβὸν, *arrabon*] of our inheritance toward [or, with a view to,⁵] redemption as God's own people [lit. 'with a view to redemption of the possession'] to the praise of his glory' (1:14). The notion of future redemption reflects the provisional nature of salvation in Romans 8, where we are saved 'in hope' of 'the redemption of our bodies' (Rom. 8:24, 23; cf. the theme of 'hope' throughout the Letter to the Romans).

It is from this base that Paul then observes the Ephesians' 'faith in the Lord Jesus and [their] love toward all the saints' (1:15; cf. Col. 1:8, 'your love *in the Spirit*'), and

² It is, of course, possible to express these things in a variety of ways; this is by no means the only way of seeing the matter.

³ As a reference to the church, 'body' is used in Ephesians as 1:23; 2:16 (possibly); (3:6, σύσσωμα); 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30. Note that *NIV*, 4:25, 'for we are all members of one body', is interpretive and not a translation. For a discussion of Paul's use of 'body' see Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday & Co, New York, 1981), esp. pp 183–210, 298.

⁴ The verb, ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, while there may be a number of possible translations (see Barth, *Ephesians*, pp. 89–92), is a compound of the verb κεφαλαιόω, 'to sum up' etc., derived from κεφαλή, 'head', which is used of Christ's relationship with his body in Ephesians 1:22.

⁵ cf. Mark 1:4, where John the Baptist was 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance [with a view to (εἰς)] the forgiveness of sins'. The baptism was not itself able to work forgiveness, but could only anticipate the redemption to come, when Jesus would give his life a 'ransom' for many (Mark 10:45).

then prays that they would know both what lies ahead as well as what is presently taking place. Thus:

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints (1:16–18).

In the meantime, they need to know:

what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come (1:19–21).

Why did God do all this? The answer lies in the following verses:

he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (1:22–23).

To fully know what it means for the church to be Christ's body there must be a revelation, so that we may see ourselves as '*his* glorious inheritance'.

None of this actually explains what it means for the church to be the body of Christ. Markus Barth has listed six 'outstanding' alternative suggested explanations,⁶ and these need not all be mutually exclusive. But it seems to me that the *primary* answer lies within Ephesians itself, namely in chapter 5, verses 25 to 33:⁷

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Christ's love for the church and his tender care for her, says Paul, is actually anticipated in the creation of man and woman, as husband and wife. He calls the intimate union of man and woman, in Genesis 2:24, 'a great mystery', probably not meaning that this mystery is particularly deeper than other mysteries so much as that it is 'wonderful', 'important', or 'glorious'.⁸ Being 'one flesh' means that Adam could declare:

⁶ *Ephesians 1–3*, pp. 194–199. They are (i) 'The body' as a current metaphor in philosophy and rhetoric by which the organisation of a city or state is compared to a human body; (ii) a reflection of certain gnostic doctrines; (iii) a reflection of Old Testament or Semitic ideas of 'corporate personality'; (iv) an expression of a sacramental theology; (v) the imagery of husband and wife in the unity of marriage; and (vi) the functional imagery of the church as the manifestation of Christ in the world.

⁷ Barth's fifth alternative, somewhat expanded.

⁸ cf. the adjective μέγας as an acclamation; cf. Acts 19:34, 35, 'the *great* Artemis'; Rev. 17:7; 18:2, 'Babylon the great'. Elsewhere it means only something large, or significant, or loud, etc.

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken
(Gen. 2:23).

The woman is now the body of the man⁹ and, as such, their union is anticipatory of, and based on, the union of Christ and his bride the church. The church is Christ's body, 'bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh', his bride.

The truth is that, as the bride of Christ, the church does not yet appear in its consummated glory. For that reason, the church, as 'the fullness of him who fills all in all', is to be understood in the eschatological setting which I discussed above.

With this as the basis, two scenarios present themselves. The *second* is the great climax and consummation, the marriage, that is, the moment when the Lamb and his bride are joined without any of the provisional elements which we now experience. The marriage feast which was earlier held out as the goal for the church, especially as regards its purity (Rev. 3:20), will be lavishly presented and enjoyed, and the Holy Spirit's role as ἄρραβὼν will have finished, since that for which the seal was intended will then have come.

The *first* scenario is the creation, when all that was intended was set out. In order, then, to understand the nature of the consummation, we must understand the nature of that which was protological. What was happening in the creation, if, as Paul suggests, it represents Christ and his bride? More, what is the creation?

When we examine the first scenario, we see that before there was any ground or garden to till, no plants or herbs because it had not rained, and even if it had there was no one to till the ground, God created man. Then he planted a garden in Eden and in that garden grew everything that would both please and sustain (Gen. 2:9). God then took the man and placed him in this garden with responsibilities to till it and keep it.

As soon as we begin to examine this scenario in any detail, a whole new world seems to open up before us.¹⁰ 'Eden' means 'delights', and the implication would be that man was placed in the place of delights, a pleasure garden. The LXX used the word 'Paradise' to translate 'garden', both here and on a number of other occasions referring

⁹ In this I am assuming that 'body', σῶμα, is the equivalent of 'flesh', σὰρξ. This does seem to be generally true within Paul's writings. (Is there a distinction being made between the two words in I Cor. 6:15–17?) However, when the writers I have looked at discuss the differences between 'body' and 'flesh', their emphasis seems always to be on the negative aspects of 'flesh'. One example is H. W. Hoehner, 'Body, Biblical View of the' in W. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 165:

The essential difference between the body and flesh is that the body can be transformed whereas the flesh cannot. The body can be used as an instrument for sin or righteousness, but the flesh cannot be an instrument for righteousness but only for sin. J.A.T. Robinson stated it succinctly: "While *sarx* stands for man, in the solidarity of the creation, in his distance from God, *sōma* stands for man, in the solidarity of creation, as made for God" (*The Body*, 31).

I have a fundamental problem with all this, namely, that it fails to take into account the creation declaration that the man and the woman are 'one flesh'. There is no evidence at all that either Genesis or Paul regarded this 'flesh' as in any way representative of Man in his distance from God! The truth is entirely the opposite.

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt 1 (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1970) pp. 249–256. Much of what follows draws either directly or indirectly from this part of the *Dogmatics*.

to this particular place.¹¹ While the idea of Paradise later became one of a place of bliss, the word means a walled enclosure, a royal park. 'What makes this Garden delightful is primarily and decisively the fact that it is specially planted by God and therefore specially belongs to Him'.¹² Recalling that in Genesis 1, Man was created after all else had been made, it is surely realistic to read Genesis 2 as implying that as God rested on the seventh day, so all that there was for Man was 'the rest', the Sabbath of God, and that, therefore, the man was put in the place which God has specially established for communion with himself. It is a sanctuary and the man's labours are not in some anticipation of rest, but are actually part of it. It is only later that the toil becomes not blessing but curse.

Karl Barth wrote:

The general nature of Paradise is that of a sanctuary. Not man but God is the Possessor and Lord of this Garden. Man finds himself in a place appointed for this purpose by God and fenced off from the other earthly places. He is specially brought there and given rest—an indication that the establishment of Paradise is a distinctive spatial parallel to the institution of the Sabbath as a temporal sanctuary in the first saga. The duty of man in this place is to cultivate and keep it—literally, to serve and watch over it—and it is no fancy if we see here the functions of the priests and Levites in the temple united in the person of one man. And as the tabernacle and later the temple had their centre—not their geometrical but their virtual and functional centre—in the Holiest of Holies, so Eden had its centre in the two trees specially planted by God alongside all the other trees, namely, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The difference between this Garden and an Elysium is particularly striking in this respect. It is true enough that man finds here an appropriate dwelling-place, that the fruit of the trees of this place is in every way attractive and good for food, and that he finds here both nourishment and an activity commensurate with his creation; but all these things are subordinated to the fact that he is here in God's sanctuary.¹³

Here the man is in the archetypal sanctuary. What is more, although the language of tilling and keeping does have an ordinary, agricultural sense, the language is also that used later to define the Levitical tabernacle duties in Numbers 3:7–8; 4:23–24, 26, etc.¹⁴ Of course, the story in Genesis 2 obliges us to see that for the man to fulfil his duties he must have a partner, hence the account of the creation of the woman. She is the only one appropriate to him.

So, then, the account of Man, that is, male and female, in the garden is given in terms that establish Eden as the archetypal sanctuary, where God is present to Man and where Man knows an intimacy with God which is specifically 'priestly'. When Israel's cultus was later set up with a high priest and other priests, etc., the reason lay in the nature of Man as created. Sacrificial elements in the cultus are, then, not *essentially* 'priestly', but become a necessary feature in the light of the Fall. But more, can we say that the priestly duties were given primarily to the man, and that for him to fulfil his function he must be 'filled' by his bride? Of course, post-Fall corruptions of the relationship between the man and the woman are not even considered at this point. What is being considered is that the man with his wife are created with a view to worship in the sanctuary.

¹¹ See Genesis 2:8, 9, 10, 15, 16; 3:1, 2, 3, 8(x2), 10, 23, 24; 13:10; Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8(x2), 9; Joel 2:3. See H. K. McArthur, 'Paradise' in G. A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, K-Q (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1980), p. 655f. Especially helpful is J. Jeremias, *παράδεισος*, in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1967, pp. 765–773).

¹² Karl Barth, *ibid.*, p. 250.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 253f.

¹⁴ See W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Apollos, Leicester, 1992), p. 19; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1–15*, (Word, Waco, 1987, p. 67).

The word 'paradise' appears only three times in the New Testament, in Luke 23:43, II Corinthians 12:4, and Revelation 2:7. Commentators have speculated about these uses, but generally retreat to the position that paradise is a place of blessedness/bliss, another way of saying 'heaven'.¹⁵ But while there may be difficulty with obtaining a full picture of what was in the mind of both Jesus and Paul (and there is no reason why we should not find their meaning in what has already been said¹⁶), the promise of Revelation 2:7 does point very clearly in the direction we have been going:

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

The reason why this promise is so clear is that (like Rev. 3:20), it anticipates what comes later in the Book of the Revelation, as well as plainly drawing on the story of Genesis 2. In Revelation 21 and 22, John sees a new heaven and a new earth, most probably meaning this heaven and earth restored to their pristine glory, but appearing in contrast to what was 'first'. But this is only the stage on which the new Jerusalem appears, 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (21:2). John is reminded that this is the point to which all history is moving:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
 'See, the home of God is among men.
 He will dwell with them as their God;
 they will be his peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true' (Rev. 21:3–5).

John is then invited to see the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Now he can see what all history has been about. Yet when he sees the bride, he actually sees the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (21:10). From this point any thought of 'the bride' disappears entirely,¹⁷ and the language is that of the city. But why? The answer surely lies in the fact that the city of Jerusalem is the historical focus of worship and, as such, the place where true worship will be found by the nations. This is where the Temple is. Or, where the Temple *was*, for there is no longer any temple in the city: its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. Just as Isaiah looked forward to the nations coming to 'the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob' (Isa. 2:3), so now John sees the nations streaming into the city and the kings of the earth bringing their glory into it (Rev. 21:24–26).

¹⁵ For example, H. A. Kent Jr., 'Paradise' in Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 826.

¹⁶ We must note, though, that first century readers did not only have the Old Testament; they also had the patterns of thought of the world around them, patterns which had developed through some centuries of Jewish theologising. It may be unrealistic to read the New Testament as if the first century world of the early church did not exist.

¹⁷ The reference to the bride in Rev. 22:17, 'the Spirit and the bride say, "Come"', is the present appeal to the readers and not to what will be.

Christ's Eschatological Fullness

This is the paradise of God! The tree of life is here and the river of the water of life flows through it (see Gen. 2:10, where the river flowed out of Eden to water the garden). The healing of the nations, the removal of the judgment of Babel, now takes place (Rev. 22:2). This is Eden restored:

Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads (Rev. 22:3–4).

The church is the fullness of Christ because the church is the body, the bride of Christ, but this is all with a view to the wonder of the great eschatological worship. For it is this which is the fullness of Christ. As the Lamb with his bride, and as the great high priest of the sanctuary, he leads the great worship. Right through the Book of the Revelation this has been the way John sees things before the throne: angels and creation and elders in worship. The *eternal* gospel is just this, 'Fear God, and give him glory . . .' (Rev. 14:7).

Just as Paul wrote that Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet and then he hands his triumphs to the Father (I Cor. 15:20–28), so now we see that this is nothing less than the Son—with all that is his, his bride in the redeemed creation—giving rapturous worship to the Father. And in this the church—the bride, the body—is completely overwhelmed as she is caught up into the adoration and worship which the Son offers to the Father, into the everlasting love which is God himself.

STUDY SIXTEEN

Doxological Man— The Return of Fullness & Unity in Worship

(by Geoffrey Bingham)



THE MEANING OF DOXOLOGICAL MAN

Doxology derives from *doxa* which means ‘glory’, and *logos* which helps to make a theme or system to words to which it is attached, so *psychology* and *theology*. Thus, to glorify God is to praise him, and so the doxological person is one who gives praise to God. Praise is linked with worship. In particular, we think of the ‘doxological person’ as one who has been lifted into praise through the delight of knowing God, seeing his actions and receiving benefits from him. A fairly common saying is, ‘All theology is at its best when it is doxology’; that is, that when a person is lifted into praise he or she has the right mind to consider God, his nature and his activity.

The person who operates in ‘the fullness of the blessing of Christ’, would necessarily be doxological. When we recognise that the Christian life is experienced in an unremitting battle with the powers of the flesh, the world, Satan, and many difficulties, then not everyone will be bouncing and overtly doxological. Indeed, we can assume that doxology may be felt in the depths, and not always be expressed vocally. Perhaps the best advice is from Paul, ‘So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God’ (I Cor. 10:31).

FULLNESS AND UNITY IN WORSHIP

Original Doxology: Celestial and Terrestrial

The state of doxological worship is a rich one, and it comports with the experience of the personal, objective and yet intimate knowledge of the fullness of God, which, in

its turn, creates or causes the fullness of God's blessing in celestial and terrestrial creatures. The heavenly creatures and all God's works are often called upon by a Psalmist to praise the Lord; the Psalmist having urged himself to such praise, and calling upon the congregation of Israel to praise God.¹ Other Psalms record the fact that all God's works praise him. The fullness of blessing in the Old Testament can be understood when one responds to 'Taste and see that the Lord is good!', so that the person says, 'My cup runneth over'. In fact the Psalms are human experiences in which the fullness of God is so richly experienced and vocalised because of the nature of God. He who does not praise God is self-centred; he who praises God and fellow-creatures is not narcissistic. To praise another is to be centred on that other for his or her sake.

True Praise is the Natural, Healthy Response Evoked by the Being and Action of God

Doxology has within it a sense of wonderment and gratitude to God for who he is, and for what he does. Job 38:7 speaks of the joy of celestial creatures at the creation of the earth. The immensity of God's Being and work are seen in his *opera ad intra* and his *opera ad extra*.² Hence praise is of the highest order of human experience because it is seated in communion with God; God's communion within himself into which Man is called, and God's going out to Man in fallenness, bringing him back into undeserved fellowship. When all his 'unfallen' works praise him, it is because of his relationship with them and the purpose he has set for them, which is, in fact, linked with his purpose for Man.

Pictures of pure doxology are found in the Book of the Revelation.³ There are seven clear passages: 4:11; 5:9–10, 12, 13; 7:9–17; 11:17–18; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8; and, on each occasion, the reasons for worship—that is, the substance of the worship events—are stated.

The Loss of Doxology

We have seen that the true, doxological state is Edenic. Eden was the place of true worship because of the presence of God, man and woman in pure marital union, law unfractured, and vocation as a royal, universal calling. We can only conjecture that these innocent persons lived as one in the true doxological state. The acceding to the serpent's word as against the Creator's word locked Man into a knowledge of good and evil that was false, hence his (their) view of all things was wrong theologically, cosmically and anthropologically. *Sin is locking oneself into oneself and others out, and this against the Triune way where the Three Persons have perichoretic life and relationships.*

¹ See Psalm 103 for these three invocations to worship. See also Psalms 19:1–4, and 145:10, for the fact that his works and his saints praise him.

² This statement is made when the Covenant and Kingdom themes are explicated and interpreted by the Incarnation of Christ who revealed the Father, and to some degree the Spirit, the introduction of the true worship, after the Cross, Resurrection and Ascension and the coming of the revelatory Spirit. The *opera ad extra* really give us rich understanding of the *opera ad intra*.

³ All worship in heaven is pure because given by (i) unfallen celestial creatures, and (ii) restored, regenerated and sanctified humanity. Also see the Essay, 'The True Worship and the Worshippers', in my *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (NCPI, 1993), pp. 258–268.

Because I believe the primal couple worshipped in Eden, therefore I believe we should start at the worship of Cain and Abel in order to comprehend right and wrong worship.⁴ True worship must have had such elements as fellowship with God (love) and true adoration, plus thanksgiving. Without doubt, both brothers brought their offerings (Gen. 4:3–4). The manner of the offering was unacceptable in Cain’s case and acceptable in Abel’s case. Obviously Cain did not offer in faith and Abel did. We have to see clearly that some propitiatory element was required in sacrifice, and it may have been that an ‘offering of the fruit the ground’ was deficient, since primarily propitiation requires blood. In any case, Cain lacked authentic doxology and Abel did not. The Apostle John states clearly⁵ that, whilst Cain hated his brother, Abel loved Cain. The loss of doxology of God destroys praise (love) of the brethren. Doxology and fellowship are found together, for where persons walk together in light there is true praise of God and fellow-man. Idolatry is the transference of doxology from God to the particular deity or deities one worships.

The Worship That Is in the Unity of the Congregation

This paper does not permit us to take in the whole history of doxology. Whilst persons worshipped God in their own contexts, and often singly, yet on the whole they worshipped congregationally.⁶ We can only suggest the patriarchs and some others worshipped acceptably, but, when it comes to Israel, we see that all worship was prescribed, and prescribed in much detail. From the ecstatic doxology, by the Red Sea, Moses, Miriam and her women, and indeed the whole congregation (*qahal*), to the later formulated congregational worship, all praise to God is in ordered fashion. The tabernacle in the midst of the camp showed the centrality of the presence of Yahweh. Moral law and ethical living were of the one piece. When true worship was practiced, then it was (i) the purifying of the already sanctified community, and (ii) the corporate expression of worship, which (iii) climaxed in doxology. Thus the connection between doxology and unity⁷. Many gods made for a disparate community. When sin locks a person into himself and locks all others out, then there can be no unity and, of course, no doxology. History—mainly through the prophets—taught Israel that the unity of Covenant had always been opposed by idolatry. Thus the prophets predicted (i) the idea of God’s Kingdom and its Messiah,⁸ showing it was on the way, (ii) that the covenant people would never be deserted, however punished they might be, and (iii) that the New Covenant would bring all Israel back together, receiving as they would the instilled holy law and the total forgiveness of sins without the sacrificial apparatus. Finally, Israel would have all nations gathered to herself, and the Abrahamic promise of inheriting the whole world would be achieved.

⁴ I believe the two types of worship—one wrong, the other right—are the key to all worship human beings give down through history. It is imperative, then, that we understand the true nature of worship-in-sacrifice.

⁵ I John 3:4–18, esp. vv. 10–12.

⁶ To note this we should pursue the terms *edah* and *qahal* as they are used in the Old Testament. The term approximating to both in the New Testament is *ecclesia*.

⁷ Psalm 133 is the classic of unity of the brethren, ‘Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!’ Genesis 13:8, ‘Then Abraham said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen”’.

⁸ The whole doctrine of the Davidic Kingdom, and the Davidic Covenant need to be studied together. In Luke 1:68–79, these two themes are seen to be one, as indeed they are seen to stem from the covenant with Abraham.

HUMANITY RESTORED, AND WITH IT, UNITY AND DOXOLOGY

In the Old Testament we need to keep in mind the principle of the Everlasting Covenant, of the fact that Israel was a kingdom of priests among all the nations, and that its future was assured by the blessings and gifts of God—none of which was to be recalled—in order to understand the doxology which so often manifested itself. Doubtless there was liturgical worship, and often it included songs both personal, congregational and psalmic in nature. Some Psalms are doxological in nature, generally in the form of ascriptions. Psalm 29 is one of these:

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy array.

In Psalms 92 to 106—to nominate but a few of the praise Psalms—we have ascriptive and doxological Psalms. It is interesting to note that they look back to what God has done. He has acted in history (cf. Exod. 15:11, et al.). So many ascriptions are there, that it is evident that they are congregational, that the *qahal* is met to worship. This is the moment of the brethren dwelling together in unity. Descriptions of worship in the temple use the phrase ‘holy array’, which means all things are set out beautifully and functionally for worship, which, in its turn, is prescribed in every detail. Sometimes when the Levites played their instruments they began to prophesy. None of this can be ascribed to gatherings of idolaters. The whole covenant people was looked upon as an assembly, a congregation, worshipping as one. Often they met for ‘holy convocation’. Generally doxologies were in the third person, but in I Chronicles 29:10–13, we have one of the most powerful of doxologies. In order to appreciate it, we need to furnish our minds and imaginations with the choreography of the temple. In what a ‘holy array’ it must have been!

Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; and David said: ‘Blessed art thou, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from thee, and thou rulest over all. In thy hand are power and might; and in thy hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name.

In the New Testament the Benedictus of Luke 1:68–79 needs close study, recalling as it does the Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Kingdom-Covenant. We simply mean that there is always a cause for doxology. ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people’, speaks of a present happening, but the whole song speaks of the past and the future also. In this sense it is classical doxology.

There are many doxologies from the Gospels to the Book of the Revelation. In Luke 2:14, we have ‘Glory to God in the highest’ at Jesus’ birth, to Christ being praised by ‘Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’, being the doxological greeting on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:9). During the times of his birth and his ministry, praise is accorded, often even by his enemies in spite of themselves.⁹ Jesus was worshipped by the women on the Resurrection Sunday (Matt.

⁹ See Matthew 9:8, 15:31, Mark 2:12, and Luke 5:26, where the gathered crowd was mainly in opposition to Jesus. There are also other occasions when hearers waxed lyrical about Jesus.

28:9). At the time of the Ascension (Luke 24:51–53), doxology followed Jesus' blessing of them. From that point onwards, we see in the Acts, the Epistles and the Revelation that doxological utterances and worship were habitual to Christian life and worship.

THE GOSPEL AND FULLNESS OF WORSHIP IN UNITY

God created Adam the man, and placed him in Eden the sanctuary, gave him the gift of Eve as part of him for ever, and in the midst of pure worship gave him the mandate for the expanding of his ministry to 'fill the world', which can be construed as enlarging Eden as the special sanctuary of God, the place of the covenant, and the Kingdom to the ends of the world. Man now had his reason for being created, his life and goal, and all of this in a community context and not in the place of atomistic individualism.¹⁰ God's goal for all creation is to sanctify it and admit it into pure worship, yet as the entire creation, celestial and terrestrial.

Jesus, the Fullness of His Blessing, the Unity and the Doxological Worship

We must note firstly that Jesus had the end of the age in mind, the salvation of the nations from the Fall and its consequences. He had come only to 'the lost of the tribes of the house of Israel' and ministered only to them, yet he had the whole world in view for God always loved it and *gave*¹¹ his Son for it and to it. Thus, Israel's view that God's promise to Abraham and to it—Israel—was that the whole world would come to Israel, and *would be Israel*, and in this sense all under the eternal covenant of God, within and as, his Kingdom, and participate in the eschatological Sabbath and its Holy things, especially worship within the Eternal Sanctuary, the Triune God himself.

Between the time of Christ's ascension and this glorious *telos* or climax, there would be the church. Jesus would build the church. He would be its leader and it his bride—his new Eve to his being the new Adam—and it would be his people, holy unto him, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests to witness to his saving and sanctifying work. He was the one who would bring the new worship, transcending all that had been known, even in the Edenic sanctuary and certainly in Israel in the time of the Old Testament. This 'in-between time' is *the age in which we now live*. It is the time of unity, the unity of love, vocation and worship.

We must speak of God as 'The Holy One of Israel ['the Israel of God', Gal. 6:16] thy Redeemer'. This redeeming of the Israel of God is redemption unto sanctification and redemption, that is, unto Edenic unity. This is the amazing miracle of which we speak *all too little*. It commences with Pentecost, which is the time of the fullness of Christ manifesting himself and which is the time of new, true worship. The new sanctuary, Christ—as the new temple—causes the nexus between the physical temple and Christ's *qahal/ecclesia* to atrophy; and the new people of the Israel of God—new

¹⁰ To pick of the threads of the protological–eschatological thrust of history, see the works of William Dumbrell, Graeme Goldsworthy, Mark Strom, and N. T. Wright. Also my Pastors' Monday Studies for March, April, June and July 1996.

¹¹ Note that in John 3:16, the word is not 'sent' but 'gave' (*didomi*), although some 40 times in the same Gospel two verbs 'to send' are used in regard to him coming into this world. The world possesses the Son. God gives him up (*paradidomi*) on the Cross for us all.

wine in new bottles—to flourish in worship; and the original mandate to be in action, with the new salvific power and thrust. It is the true holy people, the true company of kings and priests, the true holy nation.¹²

Look at the facts of the early church.¹³ Jesus had promised new and universal worship (John 4:21–24) which would be worship in the truth and by the Holy Spirit. This began at Pentecost in a powerful way. *It was worship in unity*. The Book of Acts shows us the utter unity and worship, the doxological nature of it. The new company was in accordance with I Corinthians 12:12–13, Galatians 3:26–29, and Colossians 3:9–11. It was the sanctified community, proclaiming the Gospel of God to the ends of the earth, that the whole world might become the worshipping community, Edenic in its consummation, and all the elect sharing in the completed ‘Israel of God’. Its present doxological nature can be, because it is in Christ, the Body of Christ, the Bride, the New Temple. It is the Holy Community.

Without doubt it is not perfect, it is the holy people living under the redemptive and sanctifying grace of God in the Kingdom and the New Covenant, but its glorious consummation is not in doubt, and is the source of dynamic, living hope. Thus it lives in faith, hope and love, and at the heart of its worship is the fullness of the blessing of Christ, and so it gives vent constantly to doxological amazement, gratitude and joy.

Hebrews 12:18–29 shows the unity of the church on earth and the church with Christ beyond time and space, the holy family celestial and terrestrial, at one in the unity of holy adoration, and the passages we have quoted from the Revelation give prophetic teaching and glorious assurance of the eternal doxological state of God’s true elect.

¹² It is mandatory to see (i) that this *ecclesia* is one with the old *qahal*, and (ii) it is the continuity of the Covenant-Kingdom people Israel, and so is ‘the Israel of God’.

¹³ See my booklet, *Christ’s Living Church Today* (NCPI, 1993).