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New Testament Worldview

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What worldview does the New Testament present? The documents of the New Testament derive from a number of different human authors, who write with a variety of circumstances in view. They show diversities in theme and emphasis such as we might expect. However, they also show harmony at a deep level, not only because they all come from the first century church but also because they share a common divine authorship. God the Father caused the documents to be written as his own Word. For this purpose, he raised up men whom he providentially shaped (cf. Acts 1:17–26; Gal. 1:15). They were commissioned with the authority of Jesus Christ (Mark 3:14–15; Acts 1:8), and like the Old Testament prophets, in their teaching and writing “they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

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What motivates people to pay attention to these documents? For us¹ who are Christians, discipleship to Christ motivates us. At the heart of the New Testament stands the gospel, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the gift of God. However, it is accompanied by discipleship. Being a disciple or “slave” of

1. I shall regularly use the first person plural (“we,” “us”) as the New Testament letters often do, to indicate how we who are followers of Christ ought to receive the New Testament’s instruction.

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Christ (Rom. 1:1 ESV marginal note; 1 Cor. 7:22) involves acknowledging his comprehensive lordship.

Acknowledging Christ as Lord implies believing his instruction and obeying his commands. Confession of lordship becomes meaningless if we choose what we will believe and what we will obey. If *we* choose, we are, in the end, only obeying our own will. By contrast, discipleship implies having a clear word from the Lord, a word other than what we invent for ourselves.

Christ endorses the authority of the Old Testament (e.g., Matt. 5:17–20; Luke 24:25–27, 44–49; John 10:35). Receiving the Old Testament as the Word of God is therefore one aspect of discipleship, and it has implications for a worldview. The New Testament endorses the Old Testament and its worldview, on which it builds. The Old Testament in turn contains a concept of covenantal words of God centrally deposited (Deut. 31:9–13), to which later words by divine messengers may be added (Deut. 18:15–22). In the New Testament, Jesus’ commission to the apostles, giving them his authority, anticipates the formation of the New Testament canon.

To that canon we now turn as disciples of Christ, if we are to hear a word from him that we must obey. The New Testament thus enjoys an authority on the level of the Old Testament. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament give us the Word of God himself. But, in fact, in one respect the New Testament has a functional priority, since it interprets the earlier words from God and gives us words addressed to our phase in the history of redemption, in contrast with earlier phases that now have passed away. For example, the laws concerning animal sacrifice (Lev. 1–7) still offer instruction to Christians, but the sacrifices themselves have been made obsolete through the accomplishment of Christ’s self-sacrifice.

In sum, through the Old Testament and New Testament together, in their historical relation, God speaks to us, meets us, and gives to us reliable instruction.² We find not merely interesting ideas but authoritative knowledge of God and his ways. This knowledge furnishes, among other things, the basis for a worldview.

In crucial ways, the worldview offered by the New Testament is not new but builds on that found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament also heavily influenced the great majority of first-century Jews, who regarded the Old Testament as God’s Word. We begin by noting some of these important commonalities.

Acknowledging Christ as Lord implies believing his instruction and obeying his commands. Confession of lordship becomes meaningless if we choose what we will believe and what we will obey. If we choose, we are, in the end, only obeying our own will.

2. See the excellent discussions in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948).

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God

At the center of this worldview lies one's view of God. There is only one God, who created all things and who governs and sustains them by his power. Both New Testament and Old Testament contrast radically with the polytheism that dominated the surrounding cultures.³

In becoming disciples of Christ, both Gentiles and Jews submit to Christ's revelation of the Father as "the only true God" (John 17:3). They also accept Christ's claim to be the only Son and the exclusive revealer of the Father (Matt. 11:25–27). They accept Christ's teaching about the authority of the Old Testament. Therefore, they owe absolute and exclusive obedience to the "jealous" God of the Old Testament.

What are the implications? They refrain from the idolatry of the Roman Empire, offering worship to none except the true God. Recognizing that the entire world has been created, they do not invest created things with spiritual power. They make a clear distinction between the Creator and the creature.

God's speech. The disciple who submits to Christ's word continues a pattern already found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament calls for absolute submission to God as Lord. And the God of the Old and New Testaments is a God who speaks. He transcends the world in his authority and power. Simultaneously, he is immanent in the world, both through deeds of power and through words. In fulfillment of his plan, his words take specific, permanent embodiment in written form in the Scriptures. The biblical religion differs from the surrounding paganism by repudiating competing sources of supernatural knowledge, such as oracles from gods, divination, and soothsaying (Deut. 18:9–18; Acts 16:16–18).⁴

God's sovereignty over creation. God rules over all things and controls all things for his own wise purposes (Job 1:21; Lam. 3:37–38; 42:2; Eph. 1:11). Since Jews in New Testament times recognized God's sovereignty, the New Testament typically contains reminders rather than arguments to support it (Matt. 6:25–34; Luke 12:22–34). However, it becomes an explicit topic when Paul preaches to pagans (Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–29). Created things are distinct from the Creator. They are not to be worshiped (Rom.



Ephesian Artemis

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3. See the excellent discussion in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981).

4. John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 159–77; John M. Frame, "Scripture Speaks for Itself," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 178–200; Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 953–82.

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1:20–23) but display clearly the nature of God who created and sustains them (Rom. 1:19–20).⁵

Humanity

The New Testament also agrees with the Old Testament in its basic assumptions about humanity. God created human beings in his image (1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). They have a status superior to animals, although in being made from “dust from the ground” (Gen. 2:7) and in their reproductive capacity, they share some affinities with animals. Under God’s direction, human beings exercise dominion over the animals and the whole of the lower creation (Gen. 1:28–29; 9:1–3). Human beings are morally responsible to God, and this includes individual and corporate social dimensions. The fall of Adam plunged the entire human race into bondage to sin (Rom. 5:12–21).⁶

Redemption

However, sin, death, and curse do not have the final word, because God promises redemption, beginning right after the fall (Gen. 3:15). God’s words and deeds of redemption work out progressively in the time of the Old Testament. The promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, the call of Abraham, the redemption from Egypt, the raising up of the Davidic kingdom, and other acts of God all look forward to a great, climactic redemption that is still to come.⁷

Part II: Transformations in the New Testament

The New Testament unfolds the story of the climactic redemption that takes place in the person and work of Christ the Lord. It presupposes not only the truthfulness and reliability of the Old Testament but its sense of direction; that is, it looks forward to what God will do in the future. This “forward longing” of the Old Testament now has come to realization. What the prophets hoped for has arrived (Luke 4:21; 10:24; 24:25–27, 44–49) as the “down payment” (Eph. 1:14 ESV marginal note) or first installment of what is yet to come in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

The New Testament differs fundamentally from the Old Testament because it announces that Christ now has come. Because of his coming, our position in time within the total scheme of God’s purposes has fundamentally advanced. As Hebrews puts it,

5. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 75–115.

6. *Ibid.*, 116–218.

7. See the excellent discussions in Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988).

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Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1–2)

The coming of Christ has advanced the content of God’s revelation, not only because the New Testament adds to revelation (“he has spoken to us by his Son”) but also because that revelation is climactic and final. The Son is superior to the prophets (Luke 10:24; 11:31–32; 20:9–18) and reveals God in a way that is final and permanent (“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power,” Heb. 1:3).

Advance also takes place in the deeds that accomplish redemption. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14). Jeremiah 31:31–34 looked forward to a new covenant in which God would write his law on the hearts of his people, but that fundamentally new transformation of the heart did not happen until the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. Zechariah looked forward to a time when God would “remove the iniquity of this land in a single day” (Zech. 3:9), but the removal happened only when Christ was crucified. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God accomplished the work of salvation, and it is important to realize that it was *not* accomplished before that. There is a permanent before and after to history, with the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ in the very middle.⁸

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Newness

Although the Old Testament predicted the coming of Christ and his redemptive work (Luke 24:25–27, 44–49), the exact manner and the total meaning of his coming remained mysterious (Eph. 3:1–6; Col. 1:26–28). First-century Jews primarily expected a political deliverer and warrior, who would enable them to throw off the oppression of the Roman government and regain political independence, international prominence, prosperity, peace, and respect. They were surprised, and sometimes offended, by the unconventional form that Jesus’ ministry took. Many said that he was a prophet (Matt. 16:14), but it took divine revelation for Peter to see that he was the Messiah, “the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16–17).

Thus, the New Testament introduces “surprise” elements. The Old Testament leads up to the New Testament but does not allow us to see beforehand what the New Testament reveals. Consequently, the New Testament leads to a reevaluation and rereading of the Old Testament. Having

8. See the excellent discussions in Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961); George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

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seen and experienced “the end of the story,” we look back to the earlier parts of the story with deeper insights into their significance. The change at times may be as radical as what happened to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. He had been a persecutor of the church and of what he interpreted as false messianic claims. Christ turned his world upside down by announcing from heaven: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Saul had to reread the Old Testament and reevaluate what he thought he knew, on the basis of this spectacular undermining of his beliefs.

We therefore need to look at ways in which the New Testament adds to or transforms the teaching given in the Old Testament.

The Trinity

The New Testament deepens our view of God. The Old Testament indicates that there is only one God (monotheism; cf. Deut. 6:4). It contains adumbrations or foreshadowings of the Trinitarian character of God, but the New Testament and the coming of Christ give further light. They make it clear that there are personal distinctions within the godhead. For a thorough discussion of and backing for Trinitarian doctrine, one may consult the discussions in systematic theologies.⁹ We shall content ourselves with a summary of the material in the New Testament.

First, the whole New Testament builds on the Old Testament teaching about God, rather than repudiating or attacking it. Most of the New Testament books were written by Jews, who knew from childhood there is only one God. The New Testament affirms the unity of God when it addresses pagans (1 Cor. 8:6; Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31; Rom. 1:18–32).

Second, the New Testament affirms the deity of Christ by affirming that he is God (John 1:1; 20:28), that he is eternal (John 1:1), and that he had a mediatorial role in creation (John 1:1–3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). He also receives the key title “Lord” (*kurios*), which was used in Greek to translate the special, proper name of God, *Yahweh*. In the New Testament, “lord” is used in some contexts without implying deity. However, in Romans 10:13, “Lord” is applied to Jesus in the context of a quotation from Joel 2:32, whose Hebrew texts have the tetragrammaton *Yahweh*, the special personal name of God. In other contexts, the exalted character of the title becomes clear (John 20:28; Phil. 2:10–11). In the book of Revelation, Christ has the same title, “the Alpha and the Omega,” that God the Father has (Rev. 1:8; 22:13; cf. 1:17).

These uses are all the more striking because the true God is a jealous God who demands exclusive allegiance and does not share his glory with creatures (Ex. 20:3–5; Isa. 42:8). If Jesus Christ is not God, giving him such



Tetragrammaton
Yahweh

9. See, for example, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 82–99; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 619–742. For an approach oriented to biblical theology, see Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 219–407.

honor is blasphemous. Moreover, in the New Testament the deity of Christ seems to be presupposed more often than explicitly taught, confirming that it is a deep, rather than superficial, aspect of the New Testament.

The gospel of John is particularly pointed in its exposition of God's character. It emphatically affirms the deity of Christ in its opening verses (John 1:1–3). Then it clearly distinguishes the Father and the Son, describing their relationship to one another. The Son addresses the Father as a distinct person in John 17. He affirms the indwelling of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father, which is meaningless if there is no difference or distinction between the two (John 17:21). At the same time, the language of indwelling indicates the mystery of the unity that exists between the two, which is expressed elsewhere when the Son says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). In a rich multitude of ways, John expresses both the unity of the godhead and the distinctions of the persons. He does not "solve" the mysteries that cannot be solved by finite human knowledge, but he affirms and presupposes them.

The gospel of John also clearly implies the deity of the Holy Spirit by indicating that in his coming, Christ himself will be present (John 14:23; 16:16). Against the background of the Old Testament, it is clear that the Spirit is not less than God. What is not so clear is that he is a distinct person. John makes that clear by speaking of the Spirit as "another Helper" (John 14:16). The word "another" makes it clear that he is distinct from the Son. As the one sent from both the Father and the Son (14:26; 16:7), he can be distinguished from both.

The apostle Paul does not use exactly the same phraseology as does John, but one can see that his affirmations are compatible with those in John. Christ has divine prerogatives as Creator (1 Cor. 8:6), has the name of Yahweh (Rom. 10:13), possesses "the whole fullness of deity" (Col. 2:9), and can be distinguished from the Father (1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:11).

The book of Revelation presupposes Trinitarian thinking when it places the Father, the Son, and the Spirit side by side as the source of grace and peace (Rev. 1:4–5). Hebrews affirms the deity of Christ in its opening verses (Heb. 1:1–3).

Matthew 28:18–20 presupposes Trinitarian thinking in the baptismal formula: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). The unity suggested by the singular "name" underlines the unity of God. Against the background of the holiness and jealousy of God in the Old Testament, it is unthinkable that this central formula (28:19) could bring together on the same level the Creator and a mere creature. Thus, the formula presupposes the deity of the Son and the Spirit. The appearance of distinct roles for Father, Son, and Spirit in the earlier incident of the baptism of Christ presupposes a distinction of persons (Matt. 3:16–17). The voice from heaven says: "This is my beloved Son," which indicates that the voice is the voice of the Father.

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New Testament scholars often have observed that New Testament language about the godhead *predominantly* focuses on redemption and on practical issues. There are exceptions. John 1:1–2 describes God in himself, independent of the creation of the world.¹⁰ Almost everywhere else, God is described in his relations to the world in general and to human beings in particular. The New Testament devotes the most space to articulating God’s activity in redemption, which has come to realization and climax in Jesus Christ. To put it another way, the New Testament primarily focuses on God in his “economic” or functional relations to us, not on God in his “ontological” character, as he exists in and of himself.

In the New Testament, we do not receive a philosophical treatise concerning what has always been the case about the nature of God and the world but a proclamation about what God has done in “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), “in these last days” (Heb. 1:2). In the context of this proclamation, God reconciles us to himself in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18–21), so that we come to know him (2 Cor. 4:6). Hence, we *do* obtain true knowledge of God in the context of the dynamics of redemption, and this overcomes the human resistance to knowing God.

The New Testament’s practical, redemptive focus has tempted some people to open the door and speculate about ultimate ontology, beyond the New Testament’s functional focus. These people argue that God is more ultimate than what we observe and what has been revealed. Yes, in some sense he is (1 Cor. 13:12; 1 Tim. 6:16). He is incomprehensible, so that we never master him in our knowledge. But he is not *other than* what he has revealed. Precisely in its valuable practical focus, the New Testament vigorously resists any attempt to exceed its revelation by speculatively going beyond its bounds. It resists in two practical ways.

First, the *finality* and *exclusivity* of revelation in Christ assure us that what we have come to know in Christ is indeed the very truth about God (Heb. 1:1–3).

10. John 1:1–2 is still written in human language, and this language, in its detailed texture, is surely not independent of creation, or of the concrete features of the Greek grammar in particular and the surrounding Greek culture in general. But the same might be said for anything that philosophers, mystics, or students of religion care to say about God. If we insist on having language independent of the world, we shall say nothing. By contrast, the New Testament speaks confidently of God, thereby repudiating the idea that God is unknowable and unspeakable. Yes, God is incomprehensible but not unknowable or unspeakable.

In fact, although the New Testament talks about “mystery,” the preeminent mystery concerns what was partially concealed and veiled in Old Testament times but has now been revealed and is openly proclaimed (Rom. 16:25–27; Eph. 3:1–12). New Testament teaching is scandalously open and public, in comparison with competing conceptions in Gnosticism, mystery religions, and esotericism. Secret, esoteric knowledge available to a privileged few becomes a source of pride to those who possess it. The New Testament teaching, by contrast, is determined to destroy human pride, in order that God alone would be glorified (1 Cor. 1:18–31).

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He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. (Heb. 1:3)

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” [One might equally imagine a person interested in speculation saying, “Give us the final knowledge of God as he is in himself.”] Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14:8–10)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matt. 11:27)

Second, the demands of worship require that we worship God alone and not idols. If the God who has revealed himself in Christ in the pages of the New Testament is other than God as he is in himself, we are worshipping only a substitute for God, and our worship is vain. If we are to worship exclusively the true God, as he calls on us to do, it demands *in practice* the exclusion of any attempt to drive a wedge between God as revealed and God as he is. The speculator who erects the distinction *in practice* already has removed himself from the worship of the New Testament church. He has ceased to come to God through Jesus Christ alone, and in consequence he turns from light back to darkness.

Later creedal Trinitarian formulations should be seen as accurate summaries of the implications of New Testament affirmations. They do not rely exclusively on the vocabulary and phraseology of the New Testament. Naturally, they try to draw out the implications. Therefore, they have been criticized for being too “philosophical” or “theoretical,” and are alleged to be a decline from the vitality of the New Testament. But, rightly interpreted, they affirm the same affirmations that the New Testament makes, while not dissolving the mysteries that remain for human knowledge. And, most pointedly, they warn against all attempts to dissolve the mysteries into some kind of rationalized “explanation” that would in the end bring God down to the level of human conceptuality or would speculatively construct a god other than the God who has revealed himself definitively and finally in Christ.

The uniquely focused character of revelation in Christ has led some people to go to another extreme by confining the revelation of God *exclusively* to the incarnate Christ. However, during his life on earth, Christ affirmed the genuineness of the Old Testament Word of God. In addition, John 1:1 indicates that the eternal Son existed as God before he became incarnate. Precisely through the incarnation, we see that God’s revelation is broader than the incarnation and that the One who became incarnate was God before he was incarnate.

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Creation

The New Testament deepens Old Testament teaching about creation and providence by indicating the role of the Son of God in both. The Son who is the image of God from eternity was the mediator in creating all things (1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:2; John 1:4). The statement in John 1:4, “In him was life,” suggests that his uncreated life lies behind the act of creating life during the six days of creation.

By starting with creation, John is preparing to indicate the mediatorial role that Christ has in *redemption*. Christ is the source of redemptive eternal life for those now subject to death. “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26). John focuses on the functional role of the Son in coming to give redemptive life. For this role, the Father has given life to the Son. But, as usual, with redemption comes the revelation of who God is in his Trinitarian character, and we may infer that God as revealed is consistent with God as he is. The Father and the Son share divine life eternally. By virtue of their mutual indwelling and their personal relationship as Father and Son, it is fitting that the Son serve as mediator both in creation and in re-creation.

The apostle Paul also indicates the close relation between the Son’s mediation of creation and his mediation of redemption. Colossians 1:15–17 speaks of creation, and Colossians 1:18–20 speaks of redemptive re-creation. Likewise, the book of Hebrews joins creation with redemptive purification of sins (Heb. 1:2–3).

Providence

The exhibition of God’s sovereignty in the work of creation coheres with the continued exhibition of sovereignty in providence. The New Testament continues the Old Testament conviction that God sovereignly governs all events, both blessings (Ps. 65) and disasters (Job 1:21), events in general (Lam. 3:37–38) and events in detail (1 Kings 22:34; Job 2:10; Matt. 6:25–33; 10:29–31).¹¹ Christians, having been reconciled to God through Christ, have God as Father, and what happens to them transpires in terms of his Fatherly care (Luke 12:22–34). Christians are to seek his kingdom and his righteousness, knowing that the Father will take care of everything else (Matt. 6:33; Luke 12:31).

The events that come to us come not only from the Father but also from the Son, who “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3). Christ’s governance is to be construed not only as the rule of the second person of the Trinity but also as the rule of the God-man, who has received as a reward for his sufferings exaltation to the right hand of God

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11. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 79–80.

(Phil. 2:9–11; cf. Matt. 28:18–20; Heb. 10:12–14). As the enthroned last Adam, he reigns on behalf of renewed humanity.¹²

Miracle

God has power to bring about extraordinary as well as ordinary events. In the Old Testament, he divided the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14–15) and provided manna in the wilderness (Deut. 8:2–3). In the New Testament, he brought about miraculous healings and exorcisms through Jesus and then through the apostles (Luke 9:1–2, 16–17; Acts 19:11–12; etc.). These miracles are preeminently signs of salvation. They are not simply marvels but events symbolizing and signifying that the kingdom of God has come in power. The supreme miracle is the resurrection of Christ from the dead, because it represents not only the culmination of his work but also God's seal of approval and the inauguration of new creation (cf. Rom. 6:9; Rev. 1:18). The proclamation of the gospels centers on the resurrection of Christ, as a central event by which people are called to put faith in Christ (Acts 17:30–31).

In the modern West, the Bible's testimony to miracles has become a stumbling block to many whose modern worldview makes them think such things are impossible. However, ancient people were not naïve or inferior to us. They knew that such things were extraordinary, rather than ordinary, and that is why they reacted with amazement. The New Testament presupposes that such events were possible, because God is God and does as he pleases (Ps. 115:3).¹³ The extraordinariness of miracles fits their function of drawing people's attention to the significance of what God is doing in Christ. It also provides an illustration of the marvel of regeneration, reconciliation to God, and the promise of a cosmic renewal in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1–4). If Christ is indeed the incarnate Son of God, and if God is God, it would in fact be extraordinary if no miracles accompanied him.

Humanity

The New Testament presupposes that human beings were created in the image of God, as Genesis indicates (Gen. 1:26–28; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). But it also states that Christ is the image of God (Col. 1:15; cf. Heb. 1:3; Phil. 2:6). Colossians 1:15 places this affirmation at the beginning of an exposition of the role of the Son as mediator of creation (Col. 1:15–17), thereby implying that Christ was the image of God even *before* his participation in creation. At the same time, the language of imaging clearly links itself thematically with the creation of man in Genesis 1. When we put all this together, we conclude that the preincarnate Son is the original



Christ “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Heb. 1:3)

Christ’s governance is to be construed not only as the rule of the second person of the Trinity but also as the rule of the God-man, who has received as a reward for his sufferings exaltation to the right hand of God (Phil. 2:9–11; cf. Matt. 28:18–20; Heb. 10:12–14). As the enthroned last Adam, he reigns on behalf of renewed humanity.

12. See Dan G. McCartney, “Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vicegerency,” *WTJ* 56/1 (1994): 1–21.

13. See the excellent discussion in C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 18–20, 177–95.

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image, while man is created in the image of God in a derivative sense. A link by analogy exists between the eternal Son and humanity by virtue of the act in which God created human beings.

As we already observed, the New Testament views the renewal accomplished in redemption as re-creation. Redemption naturally focuses on human beings, who are made a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). This re-creation also expresses itself in the language of imaging. Christians are “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Similarly, Colossians says, “. . . you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9–10).

In Colossians 3 the language of “image” or “likeness,” linking with the term “created” or “creator,” alludes to Genesis 1. Redemptive renewal, however, does not constitute an exact return to the situation of Adam but a conformity to Christ, who is the new man. Immediately following Colossians 3:10, verse 11 says, “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” The classification into Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free concerns features derived from the first or original creation (and of course taking into account the fall). The new creation has its foundation in its union with Christ.

Moreover, the translation of Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 in terms of “old self” and “new self” is not altogether accurate. The underlying word in Greek is *anthropos*, “human being” or “man.” In the new creation, Christ is the first and archetypal human being. Everyone else receives renewal according to the pattern that he established. First Corinthians 15:45–49 expresses it well in the context of the future resurrection:

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

The final verse says: “We shall also bear the image of the man of heaven,” that is, the image of Christ in his exaltation, having a resurrection body. The resurrection of our bodies is to take place in the future. But, by being united to Christ now, we already participate in the new order that he inaugurates. Renewal of people within the present life is renewal with the goal of being conformed to the image of Christ.

Second Corinthians 3:18 contains a similar idea, that Christians reflect the pattern of Christ: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

In Colossians 3 the language of “image” or “likeness,” linking with the term “created” or “creator,” alludes to Genesis 1. Redemptive renewal, however, does not constitute an exact return to the situation of Adam but a conformity to Christ, who is the new man.

The character of humanity itself is thus to be understood in relation to Christ. The first humanity, belonging to the first creation, was created from the dust, in the person of Adam. Adam is the model and representative for all who are descended from him. Christ in his resurrection body is the model and representative for all who are united to him. The restoration of our humanness, which was broken and twisted in the fall, comes not by a return to Eden and Adam's original situation but by an advance toward the goal of being conformed to the image of Christ. New humanity even now comes about as human beings are united to Christ by faith and renewed by his life in the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17). We are headed toward the consummation of that renewal, which will occur when we are transformed at the time of the future resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15:35–49).

Human beings, made in the image of God, have a central role within the larger created order. In the renewal and consummation, the same appears to be true, but the center is occupied by Christ, who represents all of the new humanity. Thus in Romans 8 we find that Christ's sonship is the pattern for our becoming adopted sons: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). Our status as sons is a present reality, as the testimony of the Holy Spirit indicates:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom. 8:14–17)

Adoption will be consummated in the future, as another place in Romans 8 indicates: "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). Christ's sonship becomes the pattern for our sonship, and our sonship in turn is linked to the freeing of the rest of creation: "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Indeed, Christ is the one in whom all things are summed up: ". . . a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).¹⁴

Sin

The New Testament accepts and reaffirms the Old Testament view that sin is an offense to God and a violation of his righteousness and holiness. It affirms also that sin is universal (Rom. 3:9–20). However, the coming of Christ results in a deepening of the viewpoint. The coming of Christ

The restoration of our humanness, which was broken and twisted in the fall, comes not by a return to Eden and Adam's original situation but by an advance toward the goal of being conformed to the image of Christ.

14. See the excellent discussion in Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*.

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is the coming of the Holy and Righteous One, whose crucifixion shows the exceeding wickedness in human hearts: “But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:14–15).

The coming of the true Light in the person of Christ shows up the darkness for what it is: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God” (John 3:19–21).

Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere indicates that sin does not consist only in outward transgressions of obvious moral standards but in the thoughts and intents of the heart (Matt. 5:2–7:27, and especially 5:20–48). “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone” (Matt. 15:18–20; see Matt. 23; Mark 7:1–23).

Jesus’ teaching and his miracles increase guilt: “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father” (John 15:22–24). John does not imply that there was literally no sin in Old Testament times. Rather, he heightens the effect by stating a relative contrast (Jesus versus what came before) in absolute terms. The parable of the wicked tenants makes a similar point. It is bad enough that the tenants mistreat the owner’s servants. But when they kill the son, they have come to a climax of wickedness (Matt. 21:33–44).

Though sins of all kinds exist, the central sin is sin in reaction to the coming Light: “whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).



**Expulsion from the
Garden of Eden,**
(detail),
Masaccio (Tommaso
Cassai)

Epistemology

Knowing God and fearing God are the heart of wisdom and the heart of true life, according to the Old Testament (Prov. 1:7). In the New Testament, the revelation of God comes to focus and climax in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). The revelation in the Old Testament, though genuine, is but a shadow and preparation for this climax. Hence, the New Testament can make the astounding claim that true knowledge of God is to be found only through Christ (Matt. 11:25–27; John 14:6, 9–11; 8:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3).

All human beings inescapably know God after a fashion, through his revelation in the things he has made (Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–29; Rom. 1:18–

23). But “by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Humans pervert the knowledge of God into idolatry (Rom. 1:21–23). They are in darkness (John 3:19–20). They have given themselves over to the realm of darkness and Satan (Col. 1:13), and Satan holds them captive (cf. 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 John 5:19). Satan has “blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

Man, in his fallen condition, has desperate, insuperable problems in his knowledge. Moreover, his problems are not the result of mere innocence, as if man simply had not yet been exposed to the truth. Rather, human beings already know the truth about God—his eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20)—and they simultaneously reject or suppress it. Man hates God and will do anything not to be subject to him (Ps. 2:1–3). Ours is a sinful, culpable darkness in knowledge.

The Gentiles walk “in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:17–18). With respect to spiritual things and spiritual knowledge, with respect to God, they are dead:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

What hope is there then? God must come and act in grace, with resurrection power:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4–6)

Apart from this action in giving new life and renewing the mind, even when the Light comes, it is rejected: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

In sum, man’s epistemological powers are sinfully corrupted and can be remedied only through God’s own redemption in Christ. The gospel contained in Scripture is the epistemological key to the whole of human existence. Redemptive renewal in the human heart and mind offers the only basis for seeing the world as a whole, as it really is—a world created by God in such a manner that it reveals his glory and his attributes (Rom. 1:20).¹⁵

Though sins of all kinds exist, the central sin is sin in reaction to the coming Light: “whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

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15. See the discussion of this issue in John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

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Redemption Accomplished

The predominant emphasis of the New Testament falls not on the pit of sin but on what God has come and done “in these last days” (Heb. 1:2) to accomplish the one remedy, in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament saw God rescue his people and have mercy on them, in the times of the patriarchs, in the exodus, in the wilderness, in the conquest, with the judges, with the monarchy, in the return from exile. But all these deliverances were partial and temporary. By themselves, they did not result in the “circumcision of the heart” that would represent a permanent deliverance from the inward dominion of sin (Deut. 30:6). The prophets looked forward to a final day of glorious and comprehensive deliverance that included the renovation of the heart (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27).

The New Testament announcement that the kingdom of God has come means that through the work of Christ, the day of decisive deliverance has at last arrived. Christ’s coming means fulfillment of a whole network of Old Testament prophecies that looked forward to God’s coming. God would save Israel decisively, and the nations would turn to God as they see his salvation (Isa. 2:2–4; 52:10; 56:7). Early in his ministry, Christ announced that the time has come: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). In the synagogue at Nazareth, after reading from Isaiah 61:1–2, he commented, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18–21).

Most of the Old Testament prophecies announced the fact of God’s coming and his future action in salvation, but they did not specify the chronological arrangement in detail. Many Jews in Jesus’ day wanted God to act for their benefit, to bring deliverance from Roman rule, and to bring prosperity and peace to the nation. But they wanted it to happen immediately. They did not realize that the decisive events would be spread out over time and would not take the exact form they envisioned.

In reply to popular expectations, the parable of the mustard seed indicates that the kingdom of God can take time in coming (Matt. 13:31–32). It starts in small and unassuming form but in the end is imposing. Interpretations of this and other parables vary. Nevertheless, from the earlier announcement in Matthew 4:17, it seems that Jesus equates the beginning of his ministry with the beginning of the dawning of the kingdom of God. It is the “small” beginning that his contemporaries are in danger of missing or misinterpreting. The big ending must be nothing less than the consummation of God’s salvific purposes, just as Daniel 2:34–35, 44–45 depicts the kingdom of God like a stone that grows to fill “the whole earth.”

Eschatology

The fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the realization of God’s final purposes come in stages. Theologians studying the New Testament rightly speak of “inaugurated eschatology.” “Eschatology” is used

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here in a broad sense, not merely to designate the events associated with the creation of the new heaven and the new earth (Matt. 19:28; 24:35; Rev. 21:1), but with events fulfilling Old Testament prophecies of climactic acts of salvation. These climactic acts come to focus in the earthly ministry—the life, the death, and the resurrection—of the Son of God. The new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21:1 have not yet come as a cosmic reality, but Christ the Redeemer has come. God has come in Christ. And, with his coming and the completion of his work on earth, he has accomplished salvation for the world and has opened a new age of salvation.

Old Testament prophecies describe a coming climax to God's salvific work, usually without clearly separating the work into a fixed number of distinct chronological stages. The whole process is woven together into a single complex description, because in a fundamental way it is *one* process in which the different aspects and different stages have a close relation to and continuity with one another. Some of the Old Testament prophecies focus directly on God: God comes and brings salvation (Isa. 40:10–11; Jer. 31:33–34; Ezek. 36:24–28). Others give a prominent role to a human (messianic) leader (Isa. 11:1–10; 52:13–53:12; Ezek. 37:24–28). Both of these promises find fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who comes as the Messiah who is both God and man (John 1:1–18; see Isa. 9:6–7; Dan. 7:13–14). The different stages of salvation find unity in the person whose action accomplishes salvation.

The New Testament records the first stage, the first coming of Christ. It announces to the whole world the events that have already taken place and their significance. Acts 10:38–43 summarizes apostolic preaching:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

The second stage, the second coming of Christ, now becomes the chief focus for future hope. “He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42), as Peter shows by pointing to his resurrection. The resurrection is not only a proof of the verity of his teaching and the claims made concerning his life. Logically, it also is part of his vindication, which leads to his ascension and enthronement:

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in

The new heaven and the new earth of Revelation 21:1 have not yet come as a cosmic reality, but Christ the Redeemer has come. . . . And, with his coming and the completion of his work on earth, he has accomplished salvation for the world and has opened a new age of salvation.

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heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:8–11)

In his resurrection and ascension, Jesus was given authority over death, which implies authority to make all things new:

I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Rev. 1:18)

Jesus' present authority thus guarantees the complete victory that we will see when "Death and Hades [are] thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14). A new Jerusalem comes "down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2), and "the throne of God and of the Lamb" is central in it (Rev. 22:1; see 21:22). The Lamb who was slain has the right to take the scroll from the hand of him who is seated on the throne (Rev. 5:1–10) and to bring about the realization of God's purposes, which issue in the new heaven and the new earth and a renewed humanity (Rev. 5:9–10).¹⁶

Thus, an inner unity exists between Jesus' victory over death already accomplished and the final abolition of death at the consummation. Jesus' victory, in fact, becomes the pattern for the victory of the saints when they are resurrected:

As was the man of dust [Adam], so also are those who are of the dust [his descendants], and as is the man of heaven [Christ ascended], so also are those who are of heaven [resurrected saints]. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor. 15:48–49)

The Holy Spirit who empowered the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4) now has been given to those who belong to Christ. He is "the guarantee of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14; see 2 Cor. 1:22), a down payment on the full possession that we are yet to receive. Even now we have received new life through him that leads us to anticipate future resurrection life:

But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom. 8:10–11)

Already and Yet to Come

Because of the continuity between the present down payment and the future full inheritance, the New Testament uses similar language to describe the present and the future. As we observed earlier, Romans 8 assures us that we already have become sons of God through adoption (Rom. 8:15–17; cf. Gal. 4:5–7), but then a few verses later it places our adoption in the future: "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the



The empty tomb. "He is not here, but has risen." Luke 24:6

Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

The gift of the Spirit gives us spiritual life now (Rom. 8:10), and the promise of future resurrection life (Rom. 8:11). John 5 and John 11 also move back and forth between “life” that we have now through Christ and “life” that consists in bodily resurrection (John 5:24–29; 11:23–26). Spiritually, we “have been raised with Christ” already (Col. 3:1), but bodily we *will* be raised in the future, at the second coming (1 Thess. 4:16–17).

In Acts 2:38 and 10:43, Peter announces “forgiveness of sins” as a present reality. And, indeed, Jesus announced it during his earthly life (Luke 5:20; 7:48; cf. 19:9–10). But this present forgiveness also implies a final proof of forgiveness at the time of the last judgment (Rom. 8:30–39).¹⁷

Aspects of Redemption

The redemption that Christ has achieved runs as broad and deep as the effects of sin. Indeed, it reaches further than the effects of sin, since Christ does not simply return us to Eden in order to start over but brings us forward to the consummation. Redemption touches every aspect of life. Accordingly, a variety of descriptions show its breadth of reach. We were slaves to sin, but now we have become sons of God (Rom. 8). We were alienated from God, but now we have been reconciled (Rom. 5:8–11; 2 Cor. 5:17–21). We were separated from God’s people, but now we have become fellow citizens (Eph. 2:11–22; cf. Matt. 21:43). We were under guilt and liable to punishment and condemnation, but now we are free from condemnation. We were guilty, but now we are reckoned as innocent and righteous (Rom. 4). We were captive to Satan, but now Christ has defeated him (Col. 2:15). We were subject to death, but Christ has triumphed over death (Rom. 6:9–11; Heb. 2:14–15; Rev. 1:18). We were poor and blind and captive, but now we have been liberated in the year of jubilee (Luke 4:18–19). We were in darkness, but now we have come to the light (John 1:9–13; 3:18–21; 8:12; 9:39–41; Eph. 5:8–14). We were fools, but now we have become wise (1 Cor. 1:18–31; Eph. 4:17–18). We were unholy, but now we have become holy (Heb. 10:10). We were characterized by hate, but now we love (1 John 3:11–24). We were subject to lies, but now we know the truth (1 John 2:18–27).

Subsequent reflection on redemption sometimes has attempted to polarize the issues, first by emphasizing one aspect of Christ’s work, then by denying complementary aspects. One person observes that Christ was victorious over Satan. But does he then infer that there was no need for Christ to be our sin bearer (1 Peter 2:24)? There is the mistake.

The instincts of Christians, as well as the explicit teachings of the New Testament, point us toward affirming the comprehensive character of

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17. See the excellent discussions in Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987); Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*.

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Christ's redemption. We magnify and praise Christ, and in doing so honor the Father as well (John 5:23). We see the applicability of Christ's work to every aspect of life. The worldview of the New Testament thus affirms the truth of all the aspects of redemption that it proclaims. It assumes that these aspects are complementary and mutually reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive alternative explanations.¹⁸

Union with Christ

The centrality of Christ in accomplishing redemption includes his centrality when people receive the benefits of redemption. What Christ accomplished, he accomplished for others. Those who belong to Christ participate in a whole host of benefits. At the heart of these benefits is the person of Christ himself. Those who belong to Christ are united to him. In the writings of Paul, especially, union with Christ comes to expression in the phrase "in Christ" and its variants: "in the Lord," "in him," "through him," "with him." John talks about dwelling in Christ and Christ in us (e.g., John 14:20–23; 17:22–26). But the idea of participating in Christ is not confined to one fixed set of expressions.

Union with Christ includes many aspects. We may begin with fellowship with the risen Christ in a person-to-person relation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ promises to continue, in altered form, the fellowship that he had with the disciples on earth (John 14:18–21). We speak to him in prayer (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:8), and he speaks to us through the Spirit (John 16:13–15; 2 Cor. 12:9).

Union with Christ includes dwelling in Christ and Christ dwelling in us (John 14:20). Living now means "Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27).

Union includes the fact that Christ in his work on earth and in heaven represents us, in a manner parallel to Adam's representative function as head of the human race (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45–49). Through Christ's vindication and "acquittal" in his resurrection, we are acquitted and justified (Rom. 4:25; 5:18–19). Our sin was taken by him in order that we might receive his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24). Christ is "made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Specific events that happened to Christ are ascribed to us as well, typically using the language of "with Christ." For example, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). "With Christ you died . . ." (Col. 2:20). "You have been raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1). "[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). Since Christ is the Son, we have been made sons: "God sent forth his Son . . . so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4–5).

The centrality of Christ in accomplishing redemption includes his centrality when people receive the benefits of redemption. What Christ accomplished, he accomplished for others. Those who belong to Christ participate in a whole host of benefits. At the heart of these benefits is the person of Christ himself.

Through Christ, we become heirs to Old Testament promises. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19–22)

The Old Testament anticipates a day when Gentiles also will receive blessing from God through Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12:2–3; 22:18). Certain Gentiles such as Rahab and the Queen of Sheba found blessing even within the bounds of the Old Testament story. But the details remain unclear as to how a multitude of Gentiles will participate in the promised final salvation. Now that Christ has come, it is made clear. Gentiles are saved by being joined to Christ, as are Jews. “This mystery [not revealed before] is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off [Gentiles] have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both [Gentiles and Jews] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. . . . For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you [Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. (Eph. 2:13–14, 18–20)

Union with Christ implies union with the Father and the Spirit (John 14:16–23; Eph. 2:18). This union is unbreakable (“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Rom. 8:35). The Spirit as the “firstfruits” (Rom. 8:23) is the guarantee that the union we now have with Christ will come to consummation (John 6:39–40). On our side, faith is a key aspect in our participation in this union (John 6:40). But faith does not arise unless it is granted as part of the Father’s drawing us to himself (John 6:44, 65). Our faith is preceded by the outgoing love of the Father in the Son (John 10:14, 27–29; Eph. 1:4–5). God receives glory, rather than human beings receiving it (1 Cor. 1:28–31; 2:5; 4:7).¹⁹

Through Christ, we become heirs to Old Testament promises. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29).

19. See the excellent discussions in Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*; Schreiner, *Paul*.

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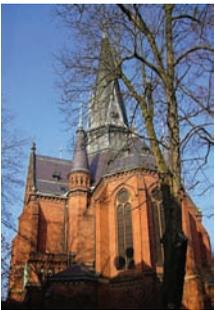
The Church

Union with Christ means renewal, re-creation, and new existence in both individual and corporate ways. When a person is united to Christ, he also is united to everyone else who is united to Christ. Salvation in Christ means not only salvation for individuals but salvation and renewal *in community*.

Theologians as well as practitioners of Christianity have sometimes polarized the issue by acting as if the individual aspect excluded the corporate, or vice versa. But human beings are both individual and social creatures. Hence, renewal or re-creation works at undoing the effects of sin in both arenas. God’s purpose includes a new Jerusalem with the corporate unity of a city, but it also is a place where each individual has unhindered access to God and therefore supreme blessedness (Rev. 22:3–5). The consummation of humanity brings to fulfillment both individual and corporate aspects of human nature. The individual is not crushed into monistic unity in which his personality is dissolved (Luke 22:28–30). Neither is the group in its corporate fellowship and unity dissolved into isolated individuals (Rev. 19:7–8; 21:9). The individual and corporate are in harmony at the end. The individual finds his fulfillment precisely in fellowship with God and, subordinately, in fellowship with those who are filled with his presence and glory. The corporate group finds fulfillment precisely in enhancing the glory of God throughout all its subdivisions, and this implies the affirmation of the significance of every individual.

During the present, the church is headed toward the goal of the consummation, but it has not yet reached it. Already the church is the new humanity in a nutshell, but it has not yet achieved its full stature (Eph. 4:13). In accordance with that goal, the church expresses individual and corporate dimensions in a harmony. The pictures of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12) and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:10–17; Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Peter 2:5) indicate the principial harmony of the individual and the group. The members of the body serve the body, while the body also serves the health of each member in it. And all serve the glory of Christ.

The life of each individual should not turn inward and serve only self; each one is to serve God and find blessedness in giving himself to God. Because God commands love to neighbor as well as love to God, we subordinately find life and blessing in serving one another. In an analogous way, the life of the community—the church—should not turn primarily inward, but be directed to serving God. The church is denominated *ecclesia*, “assembly,” a word used in secular Greek for political assemblies. But, theologically speaking, the primary conceptual background must be located in the assembly of God’s people in the Old Testament. There are various assemblies: the assembly at Mount Sinai, in which the people are formed by the Word of God into God’s holy people; the assemblies for feasts in the presence of God, celebrating God’s goodness and giving thanks for har-



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vests; and the assemblies for fasting and repentance and petition, in which people call on God for deliverance.

The church is the assembly called by God, assembling in the presence of God. It is also the body of Christ, united to him by faith. And it is the fellowship in the Holy Spirit, empowered by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in both individual (1 Cor. 6:16–19) and group (1 Cor. 3:10–17). All three persons of the Trinity are involved. The church is the beginning of a new humanity that will be consummated in the new heaven and the new earth, but it is not, in the end, man-centered. Humanity itself, by creation and by destiny, finds its meaning not in itself but in relation to God. The church is thus God-centered, in the present as well as in the future.

Though the church is first of all conceived in terms of invisible realities, those realities manifest themselves concretely in human activity. Christians meet together (Acts 2:42–47). They serve one another in concrete acts of love (James 2:14–17). They become a light and a leaven, influencing those around them (Matt. 5:14–16). Outsiders continue to come to faith and are added to the community (Acts 2:37–41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; etc.). The community grows both in extent and in maturity (Eph. 4:9–16).

At the same time, within this world the Christian community remains imperfect. Within it arise hypocrites, false teachers, immoral persons, and creators of dissension (Gal. 1:7–9; 5:12, 19–21; 6:12; 1 John 2:18–23; 2 John 7–10; 3 John 9–10). The church must discipline those who continue in sin (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). The Christianity of the New Testament is exclusivist about truth; it firmly rejects false teachings within its ranks as well as pagan religions (Acts 14:15–16; 1 Cor. 10:20; Gal. 1:7–9; 1 John 4:1–6; Rev. 13:1–18). It also is exclusivist in membership, in the practice of excluding unrepentant members. At the same time, it welcomes all who repent (Luke 19:10; 2 Cor. 2:7–11).

Students of society sometimes have postulated a tension between innovative, destabilizing forces from unofficial “charismatic” individuals and conservative, stabilizing forces from official, institutionalized leadership. No doubt, within sinful humanity and within a church still beset by sin, such tensions can be real. But the purpose of the church presupposes ultimate harmony between members with different gifts from the Holy Spirit. There is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, as Ephesians reminds us (Eph. 4:4–6). The gifts that he gives include “teachers, . . . helping, administrating,” which are typically more stabilizing, and “prophets, . . . miracles,” which are more innovating (1 Cor. 12:28). The appointment of elders in every church (Acts 14:23; cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:5) does not imply a “quenching of the freedom” of the Spirit but a movement of the Spirit to enhance and support the functioning of the Spirit’s own gifts of administrating and ruling, under the transforming power of Christ. Of course the power of rule can be abused (Matt. 20:25–28), but so can an appeal to “freedom” be abused to produce license or anarchy (2 Peter 2:19–22). When the

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church as the body of Christ is healthy and growing, the aspects of stability and innovation function harmoniously. We grow based on the stability of a foundation (Eph. 2:20–22; Matt. 16:18).

We can see all this working out in the book of Acts, as well as in the churches to which the New Testament letters are addressed. Acts shows that specific individuals such as Lydia (Acts 16:14–15) and Cornelius (Acts 10) came to Christ. But it also shows that people became part of churches that were dynamic, growing communities (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37; 14:23). It also shows the struggles that took place as people adjusted to the new realities of Christians living together (Acts 6:1–7; 15:1–35). Sin continued to threaten to disrupt the new pattern of Christian living (Acts 20:29–31). First-century churches did not perfectly model the doctrine and life that arose from union with Christ, and, like churches later on, sometimes they were racked by heresy and dissension (Galatians; 1 Cor. 1:11–13). Yet, in spite of failings, the church as a whole attracted Jews and Gentiles through the truth that it proclaimed and the life of love that it manifested (Matt. 5:14–16).²⁰

Ethics

Where do Christians get direction for their new lives? Once again, the New Testament builds on the Old Testament. The Old Testament affirmed that God is the absolute Lord. He and he alone is the ultimate source for ethical direction. He possesses the right to command his creatures, the goodness and righteousness to assure that his commands are worthy, and the power to reward obedience and punish disobedience. Moreover, man created in the image of God has a sense of right and wrong due to his very nature. Although sin can pervert and confuse the conscience, by suppressing the truth (Rom. 1:18), people never escape responsibility to God (Rom. 1:32; 2:13–15; 1 Tim. 4:2).

Salvation in Christ renews our knowledge of God and our fellowship with him, and so also renews our moral power and moral direction. Precisely in the context of ethics and behavior, Paul calls for a continual transformation: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

Christ is the final revelation of God to human beings (Heb. 1:3). Therefore, he also is the final revelation of God’s righteousness and goodness. The moral goal for Christians is to be conformed to his image (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:13–16, 22–24). This renewal also is closely associated with the Holy Spirit, who comes as the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:6–11). Paul’s contrast between “the works of the flesh” and “the fruit of the Spirit” fulfills the Old Testament contrast between the way of life and of death, the way of wisdom and of folly (Prov. 6–9).

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20. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 701–89; see the excellent discussion in Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

But in what concrete directions does the Spirit work? The New Testament puts love of God and love of the brothers at the center of its exhortations (Gal. 5:14; 1 Cor. 13; Heb. 13:1; 1 John). This love is an outgrowth of the Old Testament commands to love God and love neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40). Genuine love is not in tension with the commandments of God, but leads to fulfilling them (John 14:15; Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14). Love is deepened by the example of Christ’s love (John 13:34–35) and the empowering of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–26).

Since God remains righteous in both Old and New Testament, the basic principles of Old Testament moral standards continue into the New Testament. Not only the basic principles but every detail finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God that Christ inaugurates (Matt. 5:17–20). But the way of fulfillment involves changes and displacement of what was temporary and shadowy, because it is superseded by the reality of Christ (Mark 7:19; Acts 15:9–10; Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 8–10).

New Testament ethics is also distinctive in its goal. The goal is honoring the name of Christ (Phil. 2:11). We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth in which God and the Lamb are central (Rev. 21:1–22:5). Our short-range tactics, as well as long-range strategy, should derive from our awareness that we are soldiers of Christ involved in spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10–20; 2 Tim. 2:3–4; Rev. 2–3). The New Testament presents us with this spiritual warfare, involving angels and demons as well as human beings, not merely to enlarge our understanding of the various kinds of beings in the world but so that we might reckon practically with the importance of our allegiance to our Commander and Chief. We are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20; Eph. 2:19) and pilgrims and sojourners on earth (Heb. 11:13–16; 12:22–29; Rev. 7:13–14).²¹

Culture

One might naïvely think that Christians’ citizenship in heaven implies they should have minimal interaction with things on earth. And, indeed, certain aspects of later monasticism and asceticism have drawn this conclusion. But such a conclusion is unwarranted. The commandment to love one’s neighbor, central in both Jesus’ teaching and in the New Testament letters, demands involvement with one’s fellow human beings, not withdrawal from them. On the other hand, involvement must not lead to entanglement with the evil practices of a surrounding non-Christian world. Jesus’ prayer for his disciples formulates it succinctly: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15). And then: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:16). One must use the entire New Testament, and indeed the entire Bible, in thinking through what this implies about our cultural involvement.

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21. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 893–952.

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The driving force of Christian living does not lie either in a positive or a negative attitude toward “culture,” as such. The driving motivation should not be things or human institutions, but God. The kingdom of God is primary:

Therefore do not be anxious, saying “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first *the kingdom of God and his righteousness*, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt. 6:31–33, emphasis added)

We are servants of the King, and everything we do should be animated by and empowered by the desire to serve and honor and please him. The admonition that Paul gives to Timothy in his capacity as a preacher and church leader is, at one level, applicable to all Christians: “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (2 Tim. 2:4). Elsewhere Paul confirms this emphasis on exclusive loyalty as he points to the temporary character of various tasks on earth:

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29–31)

Some interpreters think that Paul spoke as he did because he anticipated a coming time of severe persecution, and that may be the case. But, in view of early Christians’ fervent hope for the second coming, the language of “the appointed time” and the statement that “the present form of this world is passing away” seem to go beyond a mere concern for a temporary hardship. Yes, there may be persecution, but the most fundamental way in which the “present form of this world” passes away is when Christ comes. And even if Christ does not come back while we are in the midst of some unfinished business, James points out that we do not know when we will die (James 4:14–15).

The expression “civilian affairs” in 2 Timothy 2:4 (NIV) could be interpreted rigidly to mean that no truly obedient Christian should marry, or engage in business, or rejoice with others’ happiness. According to this “withdrawal” interpretation, “civilian affairs” means any dealing with the world. But even in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, the apostle Paul shows that this is a thorough misunderstanding. Christians are to go on with their marriages, with their rejoicing, with their mourning, with their buying, with their “dealing with the world,” but they are to do so “as though they had no dealings with it.” Whatever does Paul mean in practical terms?

Careful inspection shows that the very passage that we are looking at in 1 Corinthians 7 agrees with the God-centered emphasis found elsewhere

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in the New Testament. The principles involve using the gift that one has from God (v. 7), leading “the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (v. 17), and being fully committed to pleasing the Lord (vv. 32, 34). The driving force is serving the Lord in all things. It is not a question of excluding certain kinds of activity, as if we would say, “You may engage in business, but not marry,” or “You may marry, but not serve as a tax collector” (see Luke 3:13). Or, “You may serve as a tax collector but not as a Roman soldier” (see Luke 3:14; Acts 10). Some activities such as thievery are indeed immoral (Eph. 4:28), but that is because God forbids them in his moral law, not because they include some contact with “the world.”

Serving the Lord in all things includes reckoning with the Lord’s plan for all things, and that plan looks forward to the coming of Christ and the day of judgment. All things are to be summed up in Christ (Eph. 1:10), and God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). Unlike pagans, one must *not* continue to act under the illusion that we now live with what is normal or final (2 Peter 3:4–8).

The physical stuff of this world—the plants and animals and rocks and rivers—still belongs to God, by virtue of providence as well as creation: “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (1 Cor. 10:26). The New Testament continues the Old Testament affirmation of the goodness of the created order, over against all ascetic denial (see 1 Tim. 4:3–5).

The New Testament also acknowledges the goodness of human institutions, to the degree that these still conform to the moral will of God. Christians serve the Lord by appropriate positive action in marriage, family, and business (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1; 1 Peter 2:13–3:7). God has ordained governmental authorities for our good (John 19:11; Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17).

But we are not to idolize any of these things. Nor, given the New Testament eschatological teaching, are we to imagine that the things and institutions in their present form are permanent. The coming resurrection of the body involves transfiguration, not destruction, of the old (1 Cor. 15:12–57); but it *is* transfiguration, with definite discontinuities with the old (1 Cor. 15:42–49). Far from becoming a motive for passivity and withdrawal, precisely this hope for the future becomes a ground for positive service.

At the end of the famous chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), Paul paints this picture of vigorous activity:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58)

And in Ephesians, before proceeding to give detailed instructions about marriage (Eph. 5:22–33), family (6:1–4), and business (slaves and masters, 6:5–10), Paul points to the “inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5), “the wrath of God [coming] upon the sons of disobe-



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dience” (v. 6), and the light that has dawned in association with the resur-
rection of Christ:

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Look
carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the
time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what
the will of the Lord is. (Eph. 5:14–17)

Precisely in the *concrete circumstances fully involving us in the world*, we
serve *the Lord*, not the things or institutions idolatrously.

Conclusion

The New Testament builds on the worldview of the Old Testament, and so one should see it as an advance rather than an overthrow of the Old Testament. But it includes new depths and new revelations, accompanying climactic redemption in Christ. The work that Christ accomplished, and the teaching that he brought, amazed observers, and he spectacularly displayed the wisdom and power and grace of God (2 Cor. 3:7–18; Eph. 3:8–10).

The message of the gospel amazed the Jews, who did not expect that God’s promises would come to realization in such a way. And it confounded the thinking of Greeks, who had their own worldly ideas of wisdom (see Acts 17:22–32). In fact, it scandalized both the Jews and the Greeks, as Paul himself says, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:22–23). But by God’s power some both from Jews and from Gentiles came to faith: “but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24).

The gospel brought a revolution—in life, in power, and in world-view—to all those who received it, both Jews and Gentiles. Even those who were already familiar with the Old Testament, both the faithful Jews and the “God-fearing” Gentiles such as Cornelius, found themselves relearning and rethinking much of what they thought they knew. Those coming straight from paganism experienced an even more profound revolution as they repudiated the gods and superstitions and religious practices of their past in order to embrace the true God whom they had come to know in Christ. “He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14).

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For Further Discussion

1. How can the New Testament introduce new teaching without being in tension with the Old Testament?
2. Why is the Trinitarian character of God an important aspect of New Testament teaching? How is it important for practical Christian living? And how does it protect us against speculations that claim to offer more "ultimate" accounts of God?
3. What is the significance of the fact that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)?
4. In what sense do unbelievers know God, and in what sense is knowing God the privilege only of believers?
5. In what ways have some people overlooked either the corporate aspect or the individual aspect of the benefits of Christ's redemption?
6. How do order and freedom fit together within the church?
7. What does it look like for Christians to be in the world but to refrain from entanglement with evil? Can you illustrate from one of the challenges in your life?