

Biblical Bases for Key Doctrines

Paul Marston

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About the Author

Dr Paul Marston has various qualifications including an M.A. in holiness theology. He is a Senior Lecturer (now part-time) in the University of Central Lancashire. He is also a Lay Minister in the Free Methodist Church, a worldwide conservative evangelical Methodist connection, explicitly taking what could be termed a 'Wesleyan-Arminian' theology.

His solo books include *The Biblical Family, God & the Family, Christians, Divorce & Remarriage, Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages, Women in Church Leadership & in Marriage, Gay Partnerships & the Jesus Centred Church* and *Great Astronomers in European History*.

Paul has also co-authored a number of books with the internationally known speaker and evangelist Roger Forster including: *Yes, But . . . , That's A Good Question, Reason & Faith, Christianity, Evidence & Truth, Reason, Science & Faith*, three editions of *God's Strategy in Human History, Christianity: the Evidence* and *Paul's Gospel* (a commentary on Galatians and Romans). Their books have appeared in various translations including Chinese, German, Serbo-Croatian, Portuguese, Turkish and Russian.

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Paul Marston July 2017

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Introduction

This book outlines the biblical bases of some central doctrines of the Christian faith, but also deals with issues that some have found controversial such as creation, God's sovereignty and human freewill, women in church leadership, charismatic gifts in the church and the nature of hell.

The present author (by choice, not by birth) is in one of the churches/groups in a theological stream which could be characterised in general terms as evangelical, charismatic and Wesleyan-Arminian. This involves ways to understand Scripture going back through many church streams, including holiness movements, the Wesleys, the Anabaptists, and right back to the early church teachers throughout the first three centuries. This book is written in a conviction that those in this stream are basically understanding Scripture aright, but of course even those within it diverge on various points and some who are broadly sympathetic may nevertheless not agree with all the chapters here.

Jesus' disciples can be recognised in that they love one another (John 13:35), but Jesus also said: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:31–2). His 'word' is represented in Scripture, and we need to follow it. Correct theology is not, of course, enough, and Jesus in John 5:39–40 notes that to get *life* people have also to come to him. But it *is* important for Christians to ensure that their beliefs really are based on Jesus' teaching in Scripture.

So this book was written to help Christians (including the author!) to be concerned to think through the biblical bases of their beliefs. Where readers may diverge from these beliefs, it is to assure them that these understandings are not based on fashion or culture but on a sincere interpretation of Scripture.

Jesus showed that Scripture needs 'interpreting' because this is the first thing that he did for the two he met after his resurrection on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). In connection with correct interpretation there can be good traditions (2 Thessalonians 2:15) to which we should cling. But Jesus noted that there can also be wrong traditions of interpreting Scripture which actually lead people to do things entirely in conflict with what God wants (Mark 7:6–13). During the history of the church, theologians have developed traditions of interpreting Scripture which led them to anti-Semitism, and to torture, imprisonment and burning or drowning of those who believed in

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Jesus – just as in Jesus’ time it was those who believed they were really following Scripture whose wrong traditions led them to decide to kill him (Mark 3:6). Having the *right* kind of tradition of understanding Scripture, in accord with Jesus and his teaching, is vital.

Christians should work together for the Kingdom of God with any who truly love and seek to follow Jesus in any church tradition. Jesus himself warned against exclusivity in *eg* Mark 9:38–40. But we should still seek for biblical truth.

The intention in this book is not to be highly technical, but the New Testament was written in first-century common Greek and the Old Testament mainly in Hebrew, with a bit of Aramaic. Anyone who wants to be sure that they have understood Scripture correctly has therefore to check what the original languages said and what the terms used meant. Reference may also be made to the Septuagint (or LXX), which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time of Jesus and Paul, and Paul sometimes quotes it. Christians do not regard it as inspired, but sometimes it helps us understand what the biblical words meant to the early church.

The different chapters are in a logical order, but some readers may want to focus more on some chapters than others, or simply to use the book as a basic reference work when a particular issue comes up.

The author hopes that this book may help Christians of whatever tradition or leaning, to think through the Biblical bases for what they believe. Ultimately, however, ‘theology’ is not some kind of abstract intellectual exercise, but aims to understand the biblical truths that can make us free to live and work in Jesus and in the power of his Holy Spirit.

1. The Inspiration of Scripture

Scripture is God-breathed

2 Timothy 3: ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God [= God-breathed] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Luke 24: ²⁵ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Genesis 3: ¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.

Matthew 24: ³³ You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

John 8: ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Scripture (*ie* the Bible) is ‘God-breathed’. New Testament writers have their own distinctive styles (and differing uses of grammar), but the classic Christian belief is that the words are divinely inspired and true. It should be noted, though, what the *intention* was of Scripture. It was not sent to teach us cooking, chemistry or astronomy. This does not mean that it gets these things wrong, but just that it does not teach about them. For example, it describes the sun and moon as ‘great lamps’. Strictly (as was noted in the days of the Reformers) the sun is a lamp, the moon is a mirror, and Saturn is larger than the moon. But the Scripture speaks in terms of observer language, and to us humans they *are* the great ‘lamps’. So John Calvin, for example, in his commentary on Genesis 1:16 wisely says that Genesis was written in a ‘popular style’, not to teach astrophysics. There is no contradiction between what astronomers believe and the Bible’s description in everyday terms.

Jesus clearly showed also that Scripture needs to be ‘interpreted’ – and the word used (*diermeneuo*) is a word from which we get the technical term ‘hermeneutics’, which means interpretation of Scripture. In all likelihood one

of the things he interpreted in the Old Testament which was ‘concerning himself’ was Genesis 3:15. This is not about women and snakes. Jesus says that the ‘brood of vipers’ are his human opponents; their ‘father’ is not a snake, but the Devil, the ‘father of lies’ – and that not in a literal sense (Matthew 12:24, 23:33; John 8:44). The Genesis 3:15 prophecy about crushing the serpent’s head is not about snakes, but about what Jesus did on the cross in crushing the head of evil. So Jesus indicates that this creation story is not about physical snakes and trees, but is metaphorical. This does not mean it was a fantasy or fairy story; it speaks about realities but in metaphorical form. Actually metaphorical language is used in many areas of human thought, including some aspects within science itself.

Jesus himself (who should be at the core of the Christian understanding of Scripture) often used metaphorical language. He said, for example, that people needed to be born again (John 3:3); that he would give living water (John 4:10); that people had to consume his body and blood (John 6:53); and that he had food to eat that the disciples did not know about (John 4:31). His friends as well as his enemies sometimes misunderstood him to be speaking literally when he spoke metaphorically. Jesus was not a ‘literalist’, and Jesus shows us what God is like, so no one should be surprised when God uses metaphorical language.

So how do Christians know when the Scripture speaks literally and when metaphorically? All words used metaphorically have a literal meaning too – this is what gives them their force. So the words themselves do not tell us, the context tells us. For example, the word ‘body’ (*soma*) is used many times in Scripture. When Jesus says ‘take, eat; this is my body’ (Matthew 26:26) in the same discourse as he says ‘I am the vine’ (John 15:1), we do not understand either literally. But when Scripture says ‘they found not the body’ (Luke 24:3) the whole context shows that it was the literal body of Jesus that they went to anoint, and could not find it because he had risen.

The starting question in understanding Scripture is ‘What did the writer mean to convey?’ From that Christians can expand to ‘What does it mean for us today?’ To urge proper principles of interpreting Scripture is not in any way to imply that the Bible is outdated and ‘now people know better’, or that in some ways ‘things have moved on’. For example, it is sometimes claimed that the Bible condones slavery and ‘now we know better’, so people argue that this should apply to other issues in Scripture. This is mistaken. The Old Testament permits though regulates slavery, but the Old Testament should be understood in the light of Jesus and the New, so it can be recognised that in a

1. The Inspiration of Scripture

Christian-influenced society slavery (as John Wesley said) is an abomination. The apostle Paul does not advocate overthrowing the Roman Empire and abolishing slavery as this would have been impractical. What he does is to advise slaves that if they have the opportunity they should get free (1 Corinthians 7:21), but in the meantime transform their bad experience of being a slave into being honest and trustworthy people for the Lord (Colossians 3:22–3 and Ephesians 6:5–8). However, to masters he says do not use force but rather treat slaves as God has treated you (in one instance telling Philemon to receive a runaway slave as he would receive Paul himself) (Philemon 1:17). How could slavery possibly survive in a society taking this as their guide? We can be 100 per cent behind what Paul says, and our Wesleyan traditions (Wesley and his followers, the Free Methodists, Finney, *etc*) have always adamantly opposed slavery and refused to hold slaves – in opposition *eg* to the influential nineteenth-century figures of the Reformed ‘Princeton theologians’.

So Scripture is not ‘outdated’, but it does need careful interpretation, as Jesus taught. There are some good principles in this process:

- (1) **Literary context** means where the particular passage comes in relation to other parts of that book; what is the writer’s flow of thought?
- (2) **Historical-cultural background** refers to the concepts, issues and thought forms which were current at the time of writing. For example, to understand Jesus’ comments on divorce, it is important to understand the particular issue and controversy which the language in the question (Matthew 19:3) indicates is being raised.
- (3) **Word meanings** are obviously important. We need, of course, to beware of two possible errors. The first is to assume that a word is always used in exactly the same sense, and the second is to assume that a term has a clear technical meaning when in fact it is used loosely. In general, though, looking at how a Greek or Hebrew word is used in Scripture and in other literature of the time can help us to understand its meaning.
- (4) **Grammatical relationships** are something more specialised. Most of us have to rely on linguistic experts to tell us when there may be two possible meanings to a particular structure of grammar, and which is most likely.
- (5) **Literary genre** is of general importance because, for example, poetry does not always use language in the same way as a theological treatise.

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For more details on these kinds of principles of interpretation see *eg* Gordon Fee *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* or the introductory sections in my *Gay Partnerships & the Jesus Centred Church* or the heavier Klein *et al.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

Needless to say, James does advise that if anyone lacks wisdom let him ask of God (James 1:5), and of course Christians do not approach the Scriptures as a merely academic exercise, but seeking the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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2. The Nature of God

***The Trinitarian God is relational and is Love, Light and Fire
Jesus Christ was the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole
world and whoever has faith in him receives eternal life***

Matthew 28: ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

John 1: ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

1 John 4: ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 2: ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 1: ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

Hebrews 12: ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

The idea of a Trinitarian God is both scriptural and makes most sense of God's core characteristics.

In the Old Testament, a central emphasis is on the oneness of God. Jews recited daily the Shema, which was taken from:

Deuteronomy 6: ⁴ *Hear O Israel the Lord (YHWH) our God (Elohim) is one (echad) Lord (YHWH)*.

Clearly, the LORD is ONE LORD. But this is a telling sentence because the term *Elohim* is grammatically plural as indicated by the *-im* ending. Only if there is some kind of plurality-in-unity in the Godhead does this language make sense.

This singular-plural paradox of the one God appears in other verses too:

Genesis 1: ²⁷And Elohim he is saying ‘We shall create humankind (*‘ādām*) in our own image. And likeness’ . . . and Elohim he is creating humanity (*‘ādām*) in image of him. In image of Elohim he created him, male and female he created them.

Isaiah 6: ⁸I heard the voice of my Lord (*adoni*) saying ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’

These last two verses have been fairly literally translated here. The ‘our’ and ‘us’ here surely cannot refer to angels – there is no indication that they are in the image of God, nor that there was some kind of angelic evangelism committee recruiting Isaiah. The word ‘one’ (*echad*) in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the same word as used in Genesis 2 to say that the two parts, male and female, of humanity become ‘one’ in marriage. A married couple reflect God in that they are a plurality of persons but are ONE. Like the persons in the Trinity, they may have their separate wills (*eg* Luke 22:42), but harmonise them.

These then are two key points: God is a plurality in a unity and God is *inherently* relational. Of course human language struggles to express this, and (as indeed in many areas of physics) we cannot entirely imagine it.

The New Testament fills out these Old Testament hints. Jesus told us to baptise in the *name* (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The term ‘trinity’ is not a biblical one, but we are part of the worldwide Trinitarian church (which contains many denominations) which baptises in the name of God who is a trinity-in-unity, as Matthew 28:19 seems to indicate. For salvation Jews would ‘call’ on the name of the LORD or YHWH (*eg* Joel 2:32), but the Christian confession is of the LORD Jesus, and on his name we call (*eg* Romans 10:9 and 12).

There are many other New Testament indications of the Trinity, of course. The WORD who became flesh in Jesus was with God and was God, and

2. *The Nature of God*

through his WORD God created all things. Anti-trinitarian attempts to explain away the Greek of this passage in John 1 are nonsensical.

But John goes on to spell out some other important things. God *is* LOVE. A single-person God who existed before anything was created could not be LOVE because he could only love himself – which is not really love at all. God is love, and that love existed not only within the Trinity but then for his human creation. It is a self-giving love: God sent his Son, a part of this Trinity, to be an atoning sacrifice for us.

So *which* humans does God love like this? John does not say that Jesus died for the sins only of some subgroup, but for the sins of ‘the world’ (see also John 1:29 and 3:16). John uses the term ‘the world’ very often in his Gospel and letters and it means everyone, not simply the ‘elect’ or some chosen number. We will reiterate this in chapter 4 below.

Throughout Scripture, then, we find a God who is both relational and passionate. As will be seen, he reacts and interacts with his people. The cold ‘unmoved mover’ of Greek philosophy is nothing like the relational God of the Bible. The remote, all-controlling God of some other religions is not like the true God who sent his Son for the sins *of the world* but leaves it as effective for life only for ‘whoever has faith in him’.

This LOVE of God is all LIGHT – it has no darkness in it. God does not have (as some Eastern religions imagine) a *yin* and a *yang*. He is not divided into a ‘God of Love’ and a ‘God of Judgement’. But LOVE is not sentimentality, and LIGHT has a dual function both to illuminate and to expose. So is that pure and burning LOVE of God what also makes him a CONSUMING FIRE – is it love that, to those who reject it, is destructive? This can be considered further in a later chapter.

So God is ONE. He is three persons but is ONE God, and so is inherently relational. He is consistent and his character is consistently LOVE and LIGHT and FIRE.

In Roger Forster’s book *Trinity* other lovely aspects of the Trinity are brought out, *eg* the Cappadocian fathers’ concept of the Trinity as in a kind of eternal love dance. Please read this book for a fuller picture.

3. God as Creator and Sustainer

God created heaven and earth and everything in them

God sustains all things by his powerful word

Genesis 1: ¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (NASB)

Genesis 1: ²⁶ Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind (*’ādām*) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion’ . . . ²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Colossians 1: ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Hebrews 1: ³ He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Matthew 6: ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

Amos 4: ¹³ For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!

There is no contradiction between the Bible and science. The development of modern science was largely done by devout Christians, who firmly believed in the inspiration of Scripture but also believed that God intended their knowledge of nature to come through the empirical observations of science. This is explored in the joint authored *Reason, Science & Faith*, and in my solo book *Great Astronomers in European History*.

Like these founding scientists, the present author firmly believes that God designed and created the heaven and earth, like them I am a firm ‘creationist’. However, elements of biblical language were clearly not meant to be taken literally. In the previous chapter it was noted that in Genesis 3:15 the ‘offspring’ referred to were not snakes, but those human opponents of Jesus who he called a ‘brood of vipers’ (Matthew 12:34), descendants of the devil (serpent) who were liars and murderers (John 8:44). Jesus himself was the

3. God as Creator and Sustainer

prophesied ‘seed’ or ‘offspring’ of the woman who was attacked by the ‘brood of vipers’ and who crushed the serpent’s head on the cross. All this is real but not literal – it is not about biological snakes. Jesus is clear on this. He was not a biblical ‘literalist’, and himself showed us what God is like by continually using symbolic language (and often being misunderstood). The story of humanity tempted in Eden by the ‘Serpent’ is about Satan tempting them to choose a path of experiential knowledge of good and evil rather than choosing the Tree of Life which is Christ (*cf* how the Tree of Life is described in Revelation). The account of Eden is teaching profound truths about human choice and sin, and Christians should firmly accept it. Christians should try, though, to understand it in the kind of non-literal way that Jesus indicated it should be approached. He also implied that God’s ‘Sabbath’ in Genesis 1 was not a literal twenty-four-hour day (John 5:17). In our joint book *Reason, Science & Faith* and my *Understanding the Biblical Creation Passages*, we have tried to explore how this approach harmonises with the modern science that has such profound Christian roots. All my solo and joint writings affirm biblical inspiration and that God is Creator of the universe and of humankind.

Jesus taught that God acts through natural processes. He said God feeds the birds (Matthew 6:26), but of course the birds are fed through the natural processes of nature. There is no contradiction here, because the Trinitarian God sustains the universe and natural processes have no reality outside of him. He ‘creates’ the wind (Amos 4:13), but through natural weather processes. So how far did he use natural processes to ‘create’ the animals? There is a current debate between ‘Evolutionary Creationists’ (Christians who believe God created using evolution) and ‘Intelligent Design Creationists’ (who believe that at some points God introduced jumps in organic development), with some devout and scientifically prominent Christians on both sides. But the language of Scripture itself cannot decide this for us.

What we know is that God, through the WORD, created the universe; he maintains its processes, and it exists only because he upholds it. Maybe he has made other universes, and certainly at some future time our present one will be transformed. In the meantime, he acts within it, and acted decisively in having that WORD be incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth.

4. Jesus' Death and Resurrection for Sin

Jesus died for the sin of the world and rose again on the third day

1 Corinthians 15: ³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

John 1: ²⁹ The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'

Luke 24: ³ when they went in, they did not find the body.

The context in Luke clearly indicates that the words 'they did not find the body' in Luke 24:3 are meant in a literal sense.

Of course, language *can* be used in a metaphorical way. As has already been noted, when Jesus said 'Take, eat; this is my body' (Luke 22:19), he meant something real but not literal. When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:27 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it', we know that this is metaphorical but is also real and true. It is true in the sense that Christians are effectively the hands and feet and mouth, *etc* of Jesus on earth to do his work today.

In the context of Luke 24:3, in contrast, the whole context is of the literal body of Jesus – he had risen again not in some vague spiritual sense but as a resurrection into a glorious body. Christians too will one day be resurrected with a body like his glorious, resurrected body (Philippians 3:21).

So after Jesus died he rose again.

But why did he die? Jesus died for the sin of the world, because of God's love:

John 3: ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The 'world' (*kosmos*) means everyone. To any human being, Christian or otherwise, we can confidently say: 'Jesus died for your sin.' But plainly not everyone has eternal life, so why not? The 'whoever' in John 3:16 indicates that for his sacrificial death to be effective for them they have to 'believe in'

4. Jesus' Death and Resurrection for Sin

or 'have faith in' him (as the Contemporary English Version or CEV translates it). The words 'believe' and 'have faith in' translate the same Greek root *pisteuo/pistis*. To have eternal life it is not enough to believe *about* Jesus; a person has to have *faith in* him. 'Faith' is a trust relationship.

John also puts this as 'receiving him' or 'having faith in his name' (John 1:12). The name 'Jesus' is from a Greek translation of a shortened form (*Yeshua*) of the Hebrew name *Yahoshua*, which in Hebrew means: 'YHWH is salvation'. It means having faith in who Jesus really is, the divine Saviour.

But how can a completely pure God, who is a consuming fire of love, enter into relationship with those who have sinned? How can they escape his final judgement?

The Muslim concept of the basis of God's judgement (Al-A'rāf 8) seems to be some kind of weighing of good against bad deeds, but this has never been either a Jewish or Christian idea. It has always been clear that our forgiveness is unmerited, unearned, undeserved, and given on the basis of the sacrificial death of Christ:

Romans 3: ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

Ephesians 1: ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight

1 John 1: ⁷ if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God did not *have* to forgive us, and certainly was not bound to do so because of any good deeds of ours. It was his choice to show unmerited 'grace' to us. In *this* sense it is 'all of grace'. We have no right to God's forgiveness; we have no right to be placed in rightstanding with him; we have no right to receive his Holy Spirit to indwell us and help us to live; and we have no right to a future ruling with God's Messiah as Sons of God. All these are free and unmerited gifts to us from God. They are his 'grace', which means unmerited favour. He can do it because of the sacrificial death of Jesus the Messiah who

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died on our behalf. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb of God ‘who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). But for this to be effective a person has to repent and have faith in God, to receive Jesus and to believe in his name and role as Saviour (John 1:12). Receiving a gift does not earn or merit it, and faith is not some kind of ‘work’. But a free and undeserved gift can also be refused.

5. Repentance and Forgiveness

God gives forgiveness to those who respond to his call to them for repentance

Mark 1: ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (also Luke 3:3).

Luke 7: ³⁰ But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.

Luke 24: ⁴⁶ and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things'.

Luke 5: ³² I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.

Acts 2: ³⁸ Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Acts 5: ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

Acts 11: ¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

Acts 17: ³⁰ 'While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Acts 26: ¹⁹ 'After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance' . . .

Ezekiel 33: ¹¹ Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Repentance earns nothing, and Acts 5:31 and 11:18 make it clear that it is of God's grace that repentance *to life* is given both to Jews and to Gentiles. But note that the gift of repentance is given to the *groups* (ie Jews and Gentiles) in general, although for it to be effective they have individually to accept this gift.

So if repentance to life has been given both to the Jews and to the non-Jews, what decides who will accept it and who will not?

There is a school of theology that claims it is God who decides who will repent and who will not. Such theologians admit that God *says* he wants everyone to repent, but claim that this is only his 'revealed will', and that he secretly has an 'effectual will' by which he decides to make some repent and leave others unrepentant. In ordinary terms it is hard to see how such a God could be other than either a deceiver or confused or maybe both. This is not to judge God, but to judge that those who say such things about him are mistaken. The God of Jesus and the Bible is not like that.

Acts 5:31 and 11:18, as we have seen, make no such suggestion. And Luke 7:30 is unequivocal in asserting that the Pharisees and lawyers had rejected God's plan for themselves. There was no secret will of God that they would do so.

The initiative is God's. God commands people to repent, he calls them to repent and his purpose is that they repent. He has no pleasure in having to judge those who remain unrepentant, and would rather they turn to him. It is their choice to refuse to turn to him in repentance.

This is really not just an issue of a few 'proof texts', but is the whole narrative of his dealing with Israel – showing God's real anguish at the unrepentance of so many of the nation.

God is not a deceiver, and when he says he wants everyone to repent, he really does. In some special circumstances God may tell Abraham to do something (sacrifice Isaac) that God has no intention of allowing him to do. But this is a test command, not a statement of what he wants, and the whole narrative makes this clear.

God says that he really would like everyone to repent and turn to him for forgiveness and salvation, but the implication is that he has given them a choice. So is it a *free* choice?

6. Free Choice and Freewill

God offers people a real choice of life or death

God offered humanity a choice in Eden between the Tree of Life, which is Christ, and the tree representing experiential knowledge of good and evil. There is no indication that God predetermined that they would disobey him. Scripture says:

Psalm 5: ⁴For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you.

If God really is holy and hates evil, it would be very odd for him to ordain it to happen.

Right throughout Scripture God seems to offer people a basic moral choice between following him or not; between life and death. So Moses says at a key point to Israel:

Deuteronomy 30: ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

A lot of nonsense has been written about God's intentions in dealing with the Jews. Some have said (misunderstanding Paul in Romans) that God gave the Jews the Law only to prove that no one could live a perfect and sinless life, so they all stand condemned. This is plainly untrue for the following reasons:

1. God says of Israel 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Hosea 11:1) and Jesus said that no good father gives his son harmful gifts (Matthew 7:9–11).
2. The Law itself contains sacrifices for sin; there is no presumption of sinlessness nor any indication that only an ethically perfect life can bring relationship with God.
3. Throughout the Old Testament there is reference to the 'righteous' (see below) and Hebrews 11 has a catalogue of those with true faith.

So the Law obviously *did* show just how far short of God's standards everyone falls, but it also provided an avenue to receive atonement and forgiveness for those who turned to God in faith. Moses invites the Israelites to 'choose'. There are three important points about this:

- Moses was *not* offering them a fake choice between sin or an impossible-to-achieve ethically perfect sinless life – this would be nonsense. The choice was between a life in rebellion against God or a life 'holding fast' to him and living righteously by faith.
- Moses was not prophesying about some choice 1,400 years later in the Christian era; the choice was offered to them then.
- It seems clear that Moses really did believe they had a choice – just reading through his whole interaction with God in Exodus 30–33 and then Deuteronomy, this seems very clear. He would have been astonished at any suggestion that God was secretly ordaining the general Israelite lack of faith.

Joshua later knew where he stood:

Joshua 24: ¹⁵ 'Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'

So is this a *free* choice, or was its result for each individual preordained by God? Did God, as some theologians seem to have believed, secretly issue an infallible decree that Moses and Joshua and Caleb (and maybe Rahab) would choose to hold fast to him, but the others would choose not to? Is the whole thing really a charade, where all the participants are puppets on strings predetermined as to what they choose? As Moses pleaded with them on God's behalf (and indeed had earlier pleaded with God on their behalf and in Exodus 32:14 got God to change his mind) was it all a fake? Surely not? The choice was real and free. Many readers may indeed be surprised to find that some theologians have suggested anything different.

The choice was implicit throughout Israel's history, but the Lord laments:

Isa 65: ¹² I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter; because, when I called, you did not answer, when I spoke, you did

6. Free Choice and Freewill

not listen, but you did what was evil in my sight, and chose what I did not delight in.

If this is read in context, the people are complaining that God is the potter and they the clay – he has not sent a revival and this, they suggest, explains their sinful state. But God will have none of it. It was your choice, he says. It was their decision to refuse to hold fast to him in relationship, and their choice was not what he wanted. He did not have some ‘secret will’ or ‘effectual will’ to confirm them in sin.

Generally it has been concluded that what gives individuals the ability to choose freely is what theologians and philosophers call ‘freewill’ (or ‘free will’). Actually philosophers distinguish between:

- **COMPATIBILIST** freewill, which means the organism is physically or theologically deterministic but there is no EXTERNAL compulsion.
- **LIBERTARIAN** freewill, which means that the choice is not constrained either externally or by physical determinism.

The problem with compatibilist freewill is that generally dogs have it, dung beetles have it, and it is hard to see how it goes with genuine moral responsibility. Moreover, it seems hard to see why a good God would create evil robots if this is all that compatibilist freewill allows us to be.

When, therefore, the early church use the term ‘freewill’, what they seem to have had in mind was so-called libertarian freewill. The early church universally used the term ‘freewill’ to describe what God had given humanity to allow moral free choice. Alister McGrath in his detailed study clearly states:

The pre-Augustinian theological tradition is practically of one voice in asserting the freedom of the human will. (*Justitia Dei*, p. 20)

In our *Reconsidering Key Biblical Ideas (God’s Strategy in Human History Volume 2)*, we gave clear quotations showing a belief in freewill from the leading Christians of all branches of Christianity before Augustine: Justin Martyr (c100–165); Irenaeus of Gaul (c130–200); Athenagoras of Athens (second century); Theophilus of Antioch (second century); Tatian of Syria (flourished late second century); Bardaisan of Syria (c154–222); Clement of Alexandria (c150–215); Tertullian of Carthage (c155–225); Origen (c185–254); Novatian of Rome (c200–258); Methodius of Olympus (c260–martyred

311); Arnobius of Sicca (c253–327); Cyril of Jerusalem (c310–386); Gregory of Nyssa (c335–395); Jerome (c347–420); John Chrysostom (347–407). A rejection of human freewill (in the sense described) was universally regarded as heresy. The term itself, ‘freewill’ (like the term ‘trinity’), was not a biblical one, but human freewill in this sense was taught by all branches of the early church until Augustine in the early fifth century moved from this universal Christian belief to a new theology that rejected it.

But it must be absolutely insisted that the freewill choice does not mean freedom to live some kind of ethically perfect life independently of God. Rather, it means that God gives people the freedom to accept or reject his offer of grace to help them ‘hold fast’ to him in faith, living in faith relationship with him.

The term ‘freewill’ is not a biblical term, but the term ‘will’ is. Jesus said:

John 7: ¹⁷ If anyone’s will (*thelē*) is to do God’s will (*thelēma*), he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. (ESV)

Matthew 23: ³⁷ ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would (*ēthelēsa*) I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing (*ēthelēsate*)!’ (ESV)

The ESV here reflects that in the original language the same term (Greek root *thelo*) is used in John of God’s will and human will. It reflects Matthew’s use of the same word (again the root *thelo*) to indicate what God wanted and they wanted.

Because humans are made in the image of God, he makes choice and we make choice; God has a will or desire which leads to that choice and so do we. But the implication here is that a person can decide to align with what God wants or not. Matthew is implying that God did not get what he wanted – and Augustine’s ‘interpretation’ of this verse (that ‘nevertheless he gathered all those he really wanted’) is absurd. Also absurd are the artificial traditions of theologians already mentioned who say that God’s revealed will (what he says he wants) differs from his ‘effectual will’ (what he really wants, and what he always gets). Humans are also in God’s image in that we, like him, have plans. God’s ultimate plan for a new heaven and a new earth will certainly happen, and a company of the redeemed in it is a certainty. But

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God does not decide who will repent and become part of it. It was already noted above that Luke says:

Luke 7: ³⁰ But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose (*boulēn*) for themselves.

God's plan or purpose was for Israel to repent at the preaching of John the Baptist, ready for his Messiah. Many did, but the Pharisees and lawyers rejected God's plan for them. To some men of Israel in an earlier time God said:

Ezekiel 33: ¹¹ Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord GOD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'

God does not enjoy judging and condemning people. He does not get any 'glory' from the unrepentant death of the wicked. He wants them to 'turn back' *ie* repent. This does not mean that he wants them to grit their teeth and live ethically perfect lives, but that he wants them to turn to him in repentance and faith.

In the New Testament God offers a similar choice to Christians. Paul continually urges them to 'walk worthy' of their calling (Ephesians 4:1, Colossians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:12). What would be the point of Paul making this plea if they didn't have a free choice? But, as with Moses, it is not some kind of choice to live an ethically perfect life independently of God. Actually such a thing is a nonsense, because a perfect life is one lived in total harmony with God, so it is a contradiction in terms anyway. To Paul the choice is to 'set the mind on the Spirit' (Romans 8:5–6) to allow God to transform us by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2); to live in the power of the Spirit and the indwelling Christ. But we still have a choice, and many Christians plainly don't do these things. It is to Christians that Paul says 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23), and he could have been reflecting Moses setting before the Israelites in his time 'life or death'.

A final point is that freewill does not mean God never influences human decisions directly. In *God's Path to Victory (God's Strategy in Human History Volume 1)*, we show how Pharaoh made his own moral choice to oppose God – God did not ordain this. But, having made this choice, God both allowed Pharaoh to stand in defiance and also make him the more

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stubborn to stick to his decision to defy God when prudence rather than repentance would have indicated capitulation. This was to ‘make his power known’ (Romans 9:17). This was essentially the meaning of the ‘hardening’ of Pharaoh’s heart mentioned in Romans 9 (see also detailed studies in our *God’s Path to Victory*, and *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians*, and Brian Abasciano’s *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9.10–19*).

God does not determine whether or not a person will repent, but he can shape and use their ensuing decisions for his own plans and purposes.

7. The Righteous and Faith

The righteous shall live by faith

Habakkuk 2: ⁴ Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

We need first to look at the meaning of the term ‘righteous’ (Hebrew *tsaddiq*, Greek *dikaio*). The word ‘righteous’ is used of people both in the Old and New Testaments, and we list many here (with the abbreviated reference citations) to show that it is *very* common. So for example: Gen 7:1 (Noah), Gen 18 (eleven times), Ex 23:7–8, Deut 16:19, Job 17:19, Ps 1:5, Ps 1:6, Ps 5:12, Ps 11:3, Ps 11:5, Ps 14:5, Ps 31:18, Ps 32:11, Ps 33:1, Ps 34:15, Ps 34:19, Ps 34:21, Ps 37:21, Ps 37:25, Ps 37:29, Ps 37:30, Ps 37:32, Ps 37:39, Ps 52:22, Ps 58:11, Ps 64:10, Ps 68:3, Ps 68:28, Ps 72:7, Ps 75:10, Ps 92:12, Ps 92:21, Ps 97:11, Ps 97:12, Ps 107:42, Ps 112:6, Ps 118:15, Ps 118:20, Ps 125:3, Ps 140:13, Ps 142:7, Ps 146:8, Prov 10 (thirteen times), Prov 11 (eight times), Prov 12 (eight times), Prov 13 (five times), Prov 14 (twice), Prov 15 (three times), Prov 18 (twice), Prov 20:7, Prov 21 (twice), Prov 24 (twice), Prov 28 (twice), Prov 29 (twice), Ecc 9 (twice), Is 3:10, Jer 20:12, Ez 3 (twice), Ez 13:22, Ez 18 (twice), Hos 14:9, Hab 1:4, Hab 2:4, Mal 3:18, Matt 19:41, Matt 13:17, Matt 23:29, Matt 25:27, Matt 25:46, Lk 1:6, Rom 5:7, Heb 11:4, 1 Pet 3:12, 1 Pet 2:7, 1 Jn 3:7.

The word is often contrasted with ‘the wicked’ or ‘ungodly’ *eg* in Gen 18:23, Gen 18:25, Ex 23:7, Ps 1:5, Ps 1:6, Ps 11:5, Ps 34:21, Ps 37:16, Ps 37:17, Ps 75:10, Prov 10 (ten times), Prov 11 (five times), Prov 24:16, Mal 3:18.

A ‘righteous’ person *as the Bible uses the term* is not a person who has never sinned, but a person who is living in faith relationship with God. A ‘sinner’ *as the Bible uses the term* is not anyone who ever committed a sin, but a person who is living in rebellion or indifference towards God. In the biblical sense, Christians are righteous and not sinners.

When Paul says ‘There is no one who is righteous, no not one’ (Romans 3:10), he seems to be quoting Psalm 14:1 in which the LXX has added a phrase to the original Hebrew: ‘there is none who does good, *no not even one*’. But in the context the psalmist also speaks in the same passage of the workers of iniquity ‘who eat up my people’ (Psalm 14:4). This implies that

the psalmist does not mean that literally no one is righteous, but that the wicked are in a big majority. As pointed out in our commentary *Paul's Gospel in Romans & Galatians*, in all the passages Paul quotes in Rom 3:10–18 there is a contrast between the unrighteous who are denounced, and the righteous or people of God. It would be totally absurd for Paul to be saying that all the Old Testament prophets (not to mention the apostles Peter and John) got it wrong and actually *there are no righteous* other than Jesus himself. This is neither what the psalmist nor what Paul meant. Paul does not misquote Old Testament verses out of context. As again is shown in our commentary, Paul's point is just that, taken as a whole, the Jews have been denounced by God as much as the Gentiles. It is much as someone might say 'the British today are godless' – without implying that this applied to every individual Brit. The core issue in this part of Romans is how one could tell who were the people of God, and Paul's point is that, since the nation of Israel is denounced as often as the Gentile nations, in itself being Jewish (and keeping 'works of the Jewish Law') is no guarantee at all to show that someone is living in right relationship with God.

Jesus himself referred to the righteous and unrighteous (Matthew 5:45) and to the righteous of Old Testament times (Matthew 13:17). There is no reason to suppose he would have disagreed with Luke, who called Elizabeth and Zacharias and also Joseph of Arimathea 'righteous' (Luke 1:6; 23:50). When Jesus said, 'I have not called the righteous but sinners to repentance' (Luke 5:32), he is using the terms in the same way. There is, of course, an edge to his comment, because actually his critics *thought* themselves righteous but weren't, and he also says to them: 'So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness'. (Matthew 23:28). However Jesus really *does* believe that there are righteous (who need no repentance) for he elsewhere says: 'I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance' (Luke 15:7). The ninety-nine people are not mythical sinless people but the righteous – those already living in harmony with God. Christ died for sinners (Romans 5:8), and when they repent God graciously forgives their sin and declares them to be righteous. They then live by faith.

Righteous people do not live a holy life by gritting their teeth and doing their best – they live *by faith*. Not only is this core to Habakkuk, but Paul quotes this verse in key places in Galatians (3:11) and Romans (1:17). It is a

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fundamental principle in the Old and the New Testaments that a righteous person is one living by faith – *ie* in a faith-relationship with God.

Paul is also acutely aware of the question of how a totally holy God could forgive sin, and declare to be in right relationship with him people who had sinned. We note in our commentary this passage in Romans 3:21–6:

Romans 3: ²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, being attested by the law and the prophets. ²² This righteousness of God is through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and given to all those who believe. There is no difference. ²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. ²⁴ We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God presented publicly as a sacrifice of atonement, through his [Jesus'] faithfulness, by his blood. God did this in order to demonstrate his righteous justice, because in his divine forbearance he had left unpunished the sins previously committed. ²⁶ He did this in order to demonstrate his righteous judgement at this present time, so as to be both just and the One who justified the one who is based on the faithfulness of Jesus.

(Translation in Richard Longenecker's major 2016 commentary *The Epistle to the Romans*. N. T. Wright, in his commentaries, translates it similarly.)

Jesus was our sacrifice of atonement, so that God can be righteous yet still forgive our sins and indeed forgive the sins of Old Testament righteous people. We have all sinned. We all need forgiveness from God. God provides that forgiveness through the sacrificial death of his Son. Most translations render the genitive 'faithfulness of Christ' as 'faith in Christ', but surely Longenecker and Wright (and many others) are correct to insist that the reference here is to the faithfulness of Christ. We receive it by faith, but it is his faithful sacrificial death and not our own faith which is the actual basis of our forgiveness and acceptance by God. This was looked at in detail in our *Paul's Gospel in Romans & Galatians*.

1 John 1: ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

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Acts 26: ¹⁷‘I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Acts 10: ⁴³‘All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

The righteous are not those who never sin; rather they are those who walk in the light and in harmony with God, receiving forgiveness for their sins through the sacrificial death of Jesus, and also cleansing from unrighteousness as God helps them to live walking with him. This process of ‘walking in the light’ for the righteous is reflected in their lifestyles:

1 John 3: ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

The righteous, as Habakkuk and Paul both say, are living by their faith – and if this faith is real (as James also strongly states in James 2:18), it will have outcomes in lifestyle. These will not be in keeping religious rituals or clocking up ‘good deeds’ to somehow earn something. Rather, it will mean that a Christian life lived in harmony with God will show the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22–3).

8. Saved by Grace

By grace we have been saved through faith and that not of ourselves

Ephesians 2: ⁸ For by grace (*chariti*) you have been saved through faith (*pisteōs*), and this (*touto*) is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

1 Corinthians 1: ¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing . . .

2 Corinthians 2: ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

Philippians 2: ¹² work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

1 Corinthians 3: ¹⁵ If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

Salvation is a salvaging process. It is in the past (you have been saved), the present (you are being saved) and the future (you will be saved).

‘Grace’ (*charis*) means a gift that is unmerited, unearned and undeserved. Central to the Christian gospel is the fact that what God gives us is all of these things. Our salvation is a free gift from God: unearned, unmerited and undeserved.

What exactly does Ephesians 2:8 mean? In the common Greek in which it was written nouns have gender forms: masculine, feminine or neuter. ‘Grace’ (*charitis*) and ‘faith’ (*pisteōs*) both have a grammatical gender of feminine in Greek, but the word ‘this’ (*touto*) is neuter. Grammatically, then, the word ‘this’ cannot refer directly either to grace or faith, but commentators rightly take it to refer to the whole salvaging process – the process of being saved. The whole process is God’s gift to us, received by faith.

How is that salvaging process worked out? Paul says in Philippians 2:12 that we work it out ourselves *for* God is at work in us. It is absolutely not a thing of gritting our teeth and making an effort. It is as we cooperate with the

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indwelling Spirit that we have received by unmerited grace that the salvaging process carries on in our lives. It is as God's indwelling Spirit enables us that the love of God in Christ flows out through us. In the words of Romans 12:2, we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

'Salvation' is not about getting a ticket to a spiritual heaven; it concerns the whole process by which we are salvaged and transformed – and it happens by grace.

9. Justification by Faith

A person is justified by faith

Luke 7: ²⁹ And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. (NKJV)

Romans 3: ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Galatians 3: ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (quotes Habakkuk 2:4).

Romans 4: ³ For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness (quotes Gen 15:6).

Romans 4: ²² Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness’. ²³ Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. ⁵ ¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

James 2: ¹⁸ But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³ Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’, and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Galatians 2: ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. And we have come to have faith in Messiah Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faithfulness of Messiah [our rendering – see our *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians*].

As the works of Alister McGrath and those of N. T. Wright have clearly shown, the term ‘justification’ (Greek *dikaiósis*) or to ‘justify’ (Greek *dikaioó*) was long misunderstood. It really means to be *declared to be* or *shown to be* righteous – it does *not* mean to be ‘*made righteous*’. So we note, for example, that the term is applied to God in Luke 7:29 – but the tax collectors did not *make* God righteous, they *declared* God to be righteous. This is a key distinction, and for those (like us) brought up with a wrong understanding of the term it takes a real effort to refocus our perception of what it means.

Now when people repent and God graciously forgives their sins, at that point he declares them to be righteous or ‘justifies’ them. But, because being ‘justified’ means that someone is *shown to be* or *declared to be righteous*, this can happen later in Christian life too. James 2:18 says that we are ‘justified’ by the works which arise from our faith. If to ‘justify’ were restricted to God’s act of putting a person into right relationship with him at conversion, then James would contradict Paul. But actually all James is saying is that these works show a person to be in right relationship with God – they ‘justify’ him or her.

Unfortunately, Luther thought justification meant ‘being made right with God’, and claimed Christians were justified (*ie made* right with God) ‘by faith alone’ (*sole fide*), so he famously denigrated the Epistle of James as an ‘epistle of straw’. But in fact there is no conflict, because both our faith and our works resulting from faith *show* that we are in right relationship with God – which is what ‘justify’ means.

For Jesus and Paul, a key controversy with the Pharisees was what *showed someone* to be in right standing with God – what ‘justified’ that person. Put in other words: how do you recognise someone who is in close relationship with God? The Pharisees thought it was by that person meticulously keeping ‘works of the Law’. This was not good works in general, or works of compassion, but works specific to the Jewish Law or Torah. Scholars like James Dunn and N. T. Wright have explored how circumcision, diet and Sabbaths were particular markers of being Jewish (distinguishing them even from Gentile ‘god fearers’) – and so to the Pharisees an indication of how close a person was to God was how well they kept these Jewish rituals as well as moral laws. Jesus says of them:

9. Justification by Faith

Luke 11: ⁴² ‘But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others’.

Matthew 23: ²⁸ So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Meticulous keeping of ‘works of the law’ was no indication of truly righteous relationship with God. Paul likewise absolutely insists that keeping Torah (the Jewish Law) is no indication that a person is in right standing with God. He quotes Habakkuk 2:4 twice – the righteous shall live by faith. How you tell a righteous person is that they are *living by faith*. They are ‘justified’ (*ie* shown to be in a right relationship with God) by faith.

James is not denying the centrality of repentance and faith in getting sins forgiven and becoming right with God. But to ‘justify’ does not mean to *make righteous* but to *show to be righteous*. So James is asking, ‘How do we know that a person has such faith?’ He says that it has to be by the acts that flow from that faith. This is not ‘works of the Law’ but acts or works which can only flow from faith. Hebrews 11 lists a whole set of things that demonstrated people’s faith including:

Hebrews 11: ¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ ¹⁹ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Hebrews shows, as Habakkuk 2:4 says, righteous people *living by faith*, and their faith is shown by their acts and these in turn ‘justify them’, which means show that they are in right relationship with God.

Both Jesus and Paul say the same thing. In Matthew 25 Jesus makes judgement depend on whether people have by their actions shown their relationship with God. Paul in Galatians says:

Galatians 5: ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh . . . ²² the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Biblical Bases for Key Doctrines

Romans 8: ⁹ But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

Ephesians 2: ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

To Paul, what shows a person to be in right relationship with God is that they exhibit faith. For Christians, we have the Holy Spirit within. But what shows if someone only believes intellectually or has a real faith life with God? It is not by rules and regulations they keep. It is by the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Christians' good works do not *put us in* a right relationship with God, rather they *flow from* a right and transforming relationship with God which is based just on his grace. As Jesus said:

Matthew 5: ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

If it is known that our acts of love and compassion, like for example those of the Christian 'Street Pastors' in the UK, flow from our love of God, then we are shown to be in right relationship with him through this; but it is God who gets all the glory and not us.

Finally, in what sense was Jesus '*raised for our justification*'? Because in the resurrection of Christ the Christians are *shown to be* really on the right track in claiming to know God. Christians believe that Jesus ultimately will be the judge of everyone, and of this God 'has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31). By that resurrection, those who truly put their faith in Jesus are shown to be the people of God.

10. Election

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him

Isaiah 41: ⁸ But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; ⁹you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, ‘You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off’

Isaiah 42: ¹ Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights . . .

Ephesians 1: ³ 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, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Election

In the New Testament the general word for ‘chosen’ is *eklektos*. Sometimes this is translated ‘elect’ or ‘election’, but of course there is no implication, as there is with the English term, of a choice being made by a set of voters. In the biblical context it refers to the various choices (or ‘elections’) made by God of giving particular roles to particular people. ‘Election’ may bring some undeserved opportunity of blessing, but it never implies unconditional blessing and it always involves being called to a task. There are, then, various different ‘elections’ (in this sense) in Scripture.

Israel

Israel is ‘chosen’, or is ‘the elect nation’, and the chosenness of Israel is linked with their task of servanthood in a high percentage of times that it is

mentioned, eg 1 Chronicles 16:13; Psalms 89:3; 89:19; 105:6; 105:42, 43; Isaiah 65:15. Sadly, they all too often failed to live up to their ‘calling’ (or ‘naming’), and being a member of the ‘elect nation’ was no guarantee of blessing. In Romans 9–11, Paul speaks of an ‘elect’ within the ‘elect’; these are those who have chosen to fulfil what God called them to, and have accepted his grace and entered a faith relationship with him. They are the elect ‘according to grace’. This is explored further in our books *Reconsidering Key Biblical Ideas* and *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians*.

Jesus the Messiah

Jewish theology regarded the nation of Israel as representative of humankind, a kind of ‘servant’ fulfilling the task in which Adam and Eve failed. The ‘suffering servant’ parts of Isaiah were applied to Israel (see also *The New Testament and the People of God* by N. T. Wright, where this is explained in great detail). In the theology presented by Jesus, Paul and the apostles, the Messiah is seen as focusing in himself the ‘election’ task of Israel for the nations – the true ‘seed of Abraham’ in whom all nations would be blessed. So, later parts of the servant songs of Isaiah (42.1 *etc*), whilst still in some senses referring to Israel, referred in greater focus to the Messiah or the ‘anointed one’.

The Messiah, like the nation, was chosen to do a task. *He* was chosen to be the suffering servant who would be a light to the Gentiles. The first of the tasks assigned to Messiah was to ‘bring Jacob back’ and gather Israel to God (Isaiah 49:5). The second task was: ‘I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be my salvation to the ends of the earth’ (Isaiah 49:6; see also Luke 2:32). The next verse again introduces the idea of the chosenness of the Messiah to whom God speaks – though the LXX introduced it even earlier in the passage by translating verse 2: ‘He has made me a choice (*eklekton*) arrow’. There also, incidentally, can be seen a reference in verse 2 to the type of weapon the Messiah will use: ‘he has made my mouth like a sharp sword’.

But, although the Messiah has been chosen for a task, there is no strong idea of *selection* here. It would be strange if not blasphemous to think of God as passing by other ‘possible candidates’ for the Messiahship. The nearest that the Bible seems to come to such an idea is in Isaiah 59:16 and 63:5, where the Lord says that he ‘looked but there was none to help’, and so his own arm brought him victory. But this is far from a sovereign passing-by of other ‘candidates’ – it is a total lack of them! Jesus was *the* eternal Son. No one

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else was good enough to pay the price of sin. The word ‘chosen’ implies not selection but *belovedness* and *appointment* in this context. Jacques More’s *Delecting ‘Elect’ in the Bible*, a detailed and careful examination of the Hebrew and Greek words for ‘elect’, concluded that the element of being special rather than selection was often paramount.

This may be better understood if we note the close connection between the words *eklektos* (chosen) and *agapētos* (beloved) in reference to Christ. This is shown most clearly in the way in which the Gospel writers translate into Greek the words which God spoke (presumably in the Aramaic language) during the transfiguration of Christ. Matthew renders it: ‘This is my beloved (*agapētos*) Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!’ (Matthew 17:5, NASB). Mark is similar: ‘This is my beloved (*agapētos*) Son, listen to him!’ (Mark 9:7, NASB). Luke, however, renders the same words using the Greek word for chosen: ‘This is my Son, my Chosen (*eklelegmenos*) One; listen to him!’ (Luke 9:35, NASB). Thus it may be seen that when the word ‘elect’ or ‘chosen’ is applied to Christ, its primary meaning is not one of selection, but one of *belovedness*. The point may also be illustrated from Matthew’s rendering of Isaiah 42:1. The Hebrew of Isaiah reads:

Isaiah 42: ¹ ‘Behold, my Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom my soul delights.’

The Septuagint or LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in the first century, quite naturally renders the word ‘chosen’ by the Greek *eklektos*, but Matthew does not follow the LXX in this instance. Instead he renders the Hebrew using the Greek word *agapētos* (beloved), thus:

Matthew 12: ¹⁸ ‘Behold! My servant whom I have chosen, my beloved (*agapētos*) in whom my soul is well pleased!’

Matthew, therefore, uses the word *beloved* as a substitute for the word *chosen* in this context. This type of interpretation of the word chosen is not unlike that of the LXX itself when it speaks of choice silver (Proverbs 8:19) or describes a beautiful girl as ‘choice as the sun’ (Song of Solomon 6:10 – *eklektos* is used in a free rendering of a Hebrew word meaning ‘pure’ or ‘clear’). The emphasis is not on selection, but on the value set on the object described.

So the emphasis in the ‘election’ of Jesus the Messiah is not on selection (as though there was a shortlist of candidates), but on choiceness/value and on the task.

The church

Now what about the ‘election’ of the church? All too often today this is presented as some kind of sovereign or arbitrary choice of God as to who will repent and be saved and who will not. Those who, like the present author and his church, reject this idea are said to ‘reject the doctrine of election’, and sometimes it is suggested that this is because of human pride in not wanting to ‘ascribe everything to God’. Both these ideas are mistaken. First, Christians in what may be called the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition emphatically *do* believe in the *biblical* doctrine of election, but do not believe that this idea of ‘arbitrary choice’ correctly represents it. Secondly, any revulsion at this ‘arbitrary choice’ misrepresentation of election is not about human pride, but about zeal for the God of Jesus and the New Testament whose character is being misrepresented. Jesus died for the sin of the world, and God really does love everyone and takes no delight in the death of the wicked but would rather they turn and repent.

So what *does* the election of the church mean? The key point is that the church does not have some separate kind of ‘chosenness’ or ‘election’ but is collectively ‘chosen *in Christ*’. There are, in fact, many wonderful things in Ephesians that we the church have *in Christ*:

1:3; 2:6 – we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings and made to sit in the heavenly places *in Christ*.

1:4 – we have been chosen *in Christ*.

1:6 – we have been accepted with God’s grace *in ‘the beloved’*.

1:7 – we have received redemption and forgiveness *in Christ*.

1:11; 1:13 – we have received an inheritance and a guarantee of that inheritance *in Christ*.

2:13 – the Jews and Gentiles have received a unity of reconciliation *in Christ*.

3:12 – we now have boldness and access to God with confidence *in Christ*.

The central idea in the election of the church may be seen from Ephesians 1:4 to be that we are chosen *in Christ*. The church is elect because it is in Christ, and *he* is elect. There is, moreover, a task involved in the election. The

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previous verse of Ephesians states that God has ‘blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ’. This is, indeed, a blessing, but it is also a call to battle not a call to put our feet up. It is in the heavenly places that the battle against powers of wickedness is raging (Ephesians 6:12). Being chosen in Christ implies that we are to fight in the armour which he wore as Messiah, the armour of God (Ephesians 6:11; Isaiah 59:17). This is our calling, our vocation and God’s chosen task for us in Christ. We have already seen how the words of Isaiah 49 apply to the Messiah, describing his task as to bring back Israel and to act as a light to the Gentiles. We know that the church also has to act as the ‘light of the world’, just as Christ is the ‘light of the world’ (compare Matthew 5:14 with John 8:12). It is not surprising, therefore, to find Paul and Barnabas applying Isaiah’s words about being a light of the Gentiles to their own task as part of Christ’s body, the church (Acts 13:47 quotes the LXX of Isaiah 49:6). They have taken up the task of the Chosen One of God, for they are part of his body and share in his chosenness. We also find that God’s description of the Messiah in Isaiah 49:3 as One ‘in whom I will be glorified’ may be extended to the church in Christ. Thus in Ephesians 3:21: ‘to him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations . . .’

It was later in the church’s history that rather different ideas arose concerning the election of the believers. Perhaps this was because the original word meanings became obscured – in part this was because for post-fifth-century theologians, Latin rather than the original Greek was the language used for the New Testament. So from the early fifth century arose the idea that the church’s election determines who should *become* Christians, *ie* who should repent. As such God became pictured as arbitrarily or ‘sovereignly’ selecting some to be made to repent, and passing over others whom he could equally well have selected had he so wished (the spread of this new system, introduced by Augustine, and its fallacy, is dealt with in detail in our *Reconsidering Key Biblical Ideas*). This idea remains all too common, but is simply not taught in Scripture. To reiterate, the Bible does *not* say that we are chosen *to be put into* Christ, but that we were chosen *in* Christ. Our election is not separate from his election. The meaning of Christ’s election was certainly not that he should be made to repent, and since it is this same election that Christians share in Christ, how can it be anything to do with why we repented?

It is absolutely true that the Christians' repentance earned or merited nothing. It is through God's pure grace and mercy that, when they chose to repent in response to his call, God placed them in Christ (to share his election). But it is an inverse logic that ascribes the repentance itself to the election. Christ's election implied two things for him: (a) a task and (b) a belovedness. This is what it also implies for Christians when we share in that election.

In Ephesians 1:6 may incidentally be seen the connection of chosenness and belovedness: 'his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved' in context with our sharing in his chosenness or belovedness.

The connection is much stronger in other passages. For example, it says: 'Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies . . .' (Colossians 3:12). It also says: 'knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God' (1 Thessalonians 1:4). The connection is even seen in other uses of *eklektos* – for example, Acts 15:25 refers to sending 'chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul', and Romans 11:28 says: 'concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers'. Certainly one must at least conclude that when *eklektos* is used of the church, no less than when it is used of Christ, the implication of belovedness rather than of selection is more the focus.

The emphasis on our chosenness being in Christ is deeply embedded in most of the eleven New Testament references to the election of the church, *eg*:

2 Timothy 2: ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.¹¹ The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him;¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us;

These verses are paralleled in Romans 8:17–18. Their meaning is that the elect are those who in Christ will achieve the future salvation, the liberation of creation with eternal glory and the reigning over it with Christ. The Christ-centeredness of election is apparent.

Paul also mentions election in:

Romans 8: ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to

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condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

It is important to remember that the issue of ‘no condemnation’ was first raised in Romans 8:1: ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are *in Christ Jesus*’. There is no condemnation to the ones ‘in Christ’, and when Paul returns to this theme in Romans 8:33–4 he naturally refers to ‘God’s elect’. They are chosen in Christ, and so are free from condemnation from God or men. The link becomes even clearer if we consider:

Isaiah 50: ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.⁷ The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸ he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ⁹ It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

In this passage Isaiah is speaking of *the Messiah*, the elect One of Isaiah 49:7. Paul, however, in Romans 8:31, 33–4, applies these words to *the church*, ‘God’s elect’. Surely the thinking behind this is that the elect ones are able to say, ‘Who shall condemn?’, because they are in Christ, the elect servant of God, who alone could say such a thing in his own right. We are elect and free from condemnation only because we are in the Elect One of God. Later, in 16:13, in the *only* reference to any individual in such a context, Paul greets ‘Rufus, chosen in the Lord’. Who knows why the apostle felt Rufus in particular needed to be encouraged like this – but note that here again he says ‘chosen in the Lord’, not ‘chosen to be made to repent’. Christians are not *chosen to be put into Christ* but *chosen in Christ*.

Christians are elect *in Christ*, sharing his election, which is a call to a task and a future destiny. The concept is also fundamentally a corporate one. The church, the elect, share a corporate destiny.

It should finally be noted that Peter says:

2 Peter 1: ⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with

godliness,⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble.

Election is not some irresistible decree of God about who will repent and become believers. It is about a calling and task we receive *in Christ*. So it makes perfect sense for Peter to say that we should ‘confirm it’ or ‘make it sure’. Christians do this through a lifestyle in harmony with God and relying on him.

It can just also be noted that in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul uses a completely different word (root = *haireomi*) for chosen: ‘But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you (*heilato*) as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth . . .’ (2 Thessalonians 2:13). This is not the *eklektos* election (before the earth’s foundation) of the church as a whole. Rather it is referring to them as the first to become Christians, who then received the decision of God to be salvaged through sanctification and their faith.

The disciples

If God chooses anyone to a task then that is his sovereign appointment, but they can still choose to follow their designation or not. So Jesus said to the twelve apostles:

John 15:¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last . . .²⁷ You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

Some people sometimes misapply this as though it speaks of the chosenness of all believers, but Jesus is clearly speaking to the Twelve about their apostleship. They were to ‘testify because they had been with him throughout his ministry’, and when Peter sought a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:21), the person had to be someone who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry.

Sometimes God may ask for volunteers (*cf* Isaiah 6:8), but more often he just assigns roles as he sees fit. Jesus chose just twelve to be his special witnesses.

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No one knows the basis on which he made his choice, but they were certainly not self-appointed.

Judas was chosen with the others of the twelve (John 6:70) and given the same commission (Acts 1:17), but Peter refers to ‘this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place’ (Acts 1:24). Judas turned aside – just as in the Old Testament did King Saul who was chosen (1 Samuel 10:24), anointed (1 Samuel 10:1, 15:1), given a new heart (1 Samuel 10:9) and given the spirit of prophecy (1 Samuel 10:6, 10). God chose Saul, but Saul turned aside and God *changed his mind* about him (1 Samuel 15.11, 35). Saul lost the kingship because of his own choice to disobey. With Judas, it was God’s plan that Jesus should die, and Judas was part of the means by which this happened (Acts 1:16), but if Judas had not ‘turned aside’, we can be sure that God would have found some other way to fulfil his purpose.

In the church it is *God* who appoints people to different roles (1 Corinthians 12:28). A Christian cannot call himself or herself to be a ‘king’ or ‘apostle’. God calls them into a role as he sees best. If someone does not believe that God has called them to their role in the church, then they should find what God’s call for them is. This can, of course, be an excuse to do nothing: ‘I can’t help with the tea rota because I don’t feel called’. But God gives to *each one* gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7), as will be further considered below in chapter 12. He does not call any Christians simply to sit and do nothing. When God chooses a person for a role, however, this does not mean that the person is bound to fulfil it. Judas and King Saul were both chosen and appointed, and both turned aside – in Saul’s case making God *regret* that he had chosen him as king in the first place. God will sovereignly appoint each one to a role, and help that person to fulfil it if they rely on God, but it remains their choice whether or not to seek to do so.

All Christians should unite in a belief in and rejoicing in the biblical doctrines of ‘election’ in all the contexts in which this term is used. Whenever God calls and appoints, he enables, and blessings will come to and through those who choose to fulfil their God-given callings through his gracious enabling power.

11. Predestination and Foreknowledge

Christians are predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, to be revealed as 'Sons' to liberate creation

Romans 8: ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined (*proōrizen*) to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (RSV)

1 Corinthians 2: ⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed (*proōrizen*) before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' . . .

Ephesians 1: ⁵ In love He predestined (*proorisas*) us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will . . . ¹¹ also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined (*prooristhentes*) according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will (NASB)

Predestination (Greek, *proorizō*) is in the writings of the apostle Paul. It is not (as has sometimes been claimed) merely 'one side to the truth'; it is God's absolute truth.

Sadly, the biblical term has too often been misunderstood. The word 'predestine' or 'foreordain' is made up of two Greek words *pro* (= in advance) and *horizō* (= boundary/designate). The term *horizō* is used in the LXX to mean 'mark off boundaries' (cf *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, Abbott-Smith, p. 323), and from it we get our word *horizon*. It means to set out or mark off, and can be used with a human subject (Acts 11:29) without implication of inevitability. The combined word *pro horizō* is used in the New Testament only with God as subject. It has nothing to do

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with how we became Christians, nor why some people become Christians and some not.

Modern Reformed or Calvinist figures (eg Wayne Grudem) have suggested that ‘predestination’ and what they understand by ‘election’ are the same thing, *ie* a supposedly ‘sovereign’ choice of God as to who should become Christians. However, John Calvin himself (who shared this Augustinian view of the meaning of ‘election’) said that predestination does *not* refer to what he understood by election, but to ‘that purpose or decree of God by which he has ordained that the cross is to be borne by his people;’ (Calvin, *Comentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, tr. Sibson, p. 343).

Predestination concerns the horizon or destiny that God always intended for humanity, *ie* to become like Jesus, but it can be fulfilled only by those who put their faith and trust in him. So as Christians, the horizon given us by God is to be conformed to the image of his Son (Romans 8) and to have an amazing future (1 Corinthians 2). Romans 8 also speaks of how the creation waits eagerly for the ‘revealing’ of the Sons of God (verse 18) as we ourselves are ‘waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body’ (verse 23). Ephesians 1:5 has the same theme: our horizon is the ‘adoption as sons’ through Jesus the Messiah. Ephesians 1:11 adds that this inheritance or horizon has been given us according to his purpose who energizes (*energountos*) all things according to the plan of his will. In Ephesians 1:11 we find that God is ‘energizing’. The word *energeo* means this (and not ‘accomplishes’, as the NRSVA has it), and Satan is also ‘energizing’ (Ephesians 2:2), so Christians must ensure we plug into the right energy. For Christians, as we work out our own salvation, it is God who energises in us to do his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). The same Greek word *energeo* is used also for the effect of the prayers of a righteous person (James 5:16). Any idea that God predetermines everything that happens is totally foreign to the language of Scripture here and plainly contradicts great parts of it elsewhere.

So predestination is a true, wonderful and exciting biblical truth. God has given his people a wonderful horizon. Praise God. There is absolutely nothing sinister about it. All Christians should unreservedly accept and affirm it

12. Church Life and Spiritual Gifts

***Christians are the body of Christ and individually members of it
Christians should strive to excel in spiritual gifts for building
up the church***

Romans 12: ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12: ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses . . .

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

All Christians have the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9), and should be manifesting the *fruit* of the Spirit. But they have different *gifts* to bring for the upbuilding of the church. So are these ‘gifts’ (which in Greek is *charismata*) natural or supernatural? A look at the list shows that Paul makes no such distinction. The ‘grace’ given us could be by birth or by supernatural

12. Church Life and Spiritual Gifts

gifting, though any birth gift needs to be ‘spirit anointed’ if it is to build the church with silver and gold rather than wood, hay and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12). Paul’s key point is that all the Christians are members of the body of Christ, and all should be using their gifts (natural or supernatural) to build the church and bring it to perfection as the bride of Christ.

Some theologians have claimed that all the supernatural gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age, but Paul gives no indication of this. In 1 Corinthians 13 he points out that any works done for the church (even martyrdom, faith or great acts) are nothing if they are not done in Love. He also points out:

1 Corinthians 13: ⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

In writing here about the cessation of tongues and prophecy, Paul is not talking about the end of the apostolic age in the first century, but the time after the resurrection when we see Christ face to face (13:12). At that time knowledge will become absolute and there will be no need for tongues or prophecy. But knowledge did not become absolute at the end of the apostolic age, so it is absurd for anyone to apply this to prophecy and tongues at that stage.

Do those who believe that ‘charismatic’ gifts like tongues and prophecies have now ceased in the church also believe that knowledge has now ceased? Or that God no longer gives the church those with gifts of teaching, administration or encouragement? Or that God no longer gives ‘apostles’ – not in the sense of what Scripture calls ‘the Twelve’, who were given unique authority, but in the sense of missionaries (as Barnabas in Acts 14:14, Andronicus and Junia in Romans 16:7)? There is no reason to suppose that gifts of prophecy, tongues or healings have now ceased either.

Acts 2:17 takes up the prophecy in Joel 2:28 that in the ‘last days’ the Spirit will be poured out and young men and women will prophesy and old men dream dreams. Peter applies that to what is happening then, and there is no indication that we are now any less in the ‘last days’ than he was.

Paul is, however, concerned that the ‘body ministry’ he envisages as the norm in the church does not lead to anarchy. He says:

1 Corinthians 14: ²⁶ What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. ³² And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, ³³ for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

Few churches today actually try to follow this format. Paul does not so much command it as assumes that this is the norm – and he does give as a ‘command of the Lord’ that there should be proper discipline in such services. ‘Prophecy’ is not only foretelling the future but bringing God’s message to the present. Those listening should ‘weigh what is said’ – evaluate it. But above all Paul wants order. And he is pragmatic – if outsiders come in and hear everyone babbling, they will think you are mad! (14:23). Christians need to be aware of this in worship services.

Again there is no indication that he thinks this kind of ‘body ministry’ will cease at the end of the apostolic age. Prophecies and tongues (given by both men and women, as we find in 1 Corinthians 11) are just assumed to be part of ongoing church life.

So Christians should strive to excel in spiritual gifts (‘supernatural’ or spirit-anointed ‘natural’ gifts) for building up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12). But spiritual gifts do not necessarily indicate holiness or closeness to God. King Saul was given the anointing of God (1 Samuel 10:1), the gift of prophecy (1 Samuel 10:6) and a new heart (1 Samuel 10:9). Then his choice of disobedience led God to change his mind about him and take away the kingdom because his disobedience led him further and further away from God. Gifts are no guarantee of holiness. What shows a person’s closeness to God is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–3). Anything built into the church without love is like wood, hay and straw; however great it looks now, it will be tested in the judgement by the pure fire of the love of God (1 Corinthians 3:12).

13. The Church in the World

The church is called to make true disciples of love

Christians are salt and light

Christians work together with God to bring good, in practical ways and in prayer

The church is called to spiritual warfare

Matthew 28: ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 5: ¹³ ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden’.

1 John 1: ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 2: ⁹ Whoever says, ‘I am in the light’, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.

1 John 3: ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous . . . ¹⁰ The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

Romans 8: ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (RSV)

Biblical Bases for Key Doctrines

Ephesians 6: ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm . . . ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

The church was meant to be active in the world. Disciples of Jesus are baptised in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – what we call the ‘Trinity’ – and true disciples will also reflect this in their lifestyles. Followers of Jesus were meant to be salt to give a good taste and preserve, and were meant to be light to illuminate in the world. If they are not doing this then they are (says Jesus) no use. Walking in the light means that Christians are in a close and open relationship with God. It does not mean that they never sin, but that they do not choose a sinful lifestyle. With the power of God within them, as John says, they ‘do right’; their lifestyle reflects that relationship. When they do sin, they confess (to God and to anyone who knows they have wronged them), and through the sacrificial blood of Jesus are not only forgiven but cleansed from unrighteousness. Our Christian relationship with God is transforming; he is renewing our minds if we let him (Romans 12:2).

There is also a powerful picture of Christians in the church working together with God. Romans 8:26 pictures this as we pray, the Holy Spirit being intimately involved in our prayer that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven when we don’t always know what this is. In both *God’s Path to Victory* and *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians* we have explained why the RSV translation of Romans 8:28 (and the NIV margin) is correct. It continues the theme of 8:26. God ‘works together’ and the word is *sunergeo* which really means ‘*energises together*’. Indeed, we have already noted that in Ephesians God is *energising* in all things (1:11). God energises in us (Ephesians 3:20), but also Satan energises in the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2). It is also true that the prayer of a person in right standing with God is an effective *energising* power (James 5:16). The idea of Christians as God’s fellow *energisers* or workers appears elsewhere. In Mark 16:20 we find that as the disciples preached, the Lord ‘worked together’ with them. In 1 Corinthians 3:9 Paul says that ‘we are God’s fellow workers’. In 2 Corinthians 6:1 he again describes himself as ‘working together’ with God using the same term as in Romans 8:28. Incredible as it may seem, this is

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what God wants from us as Christians.

Christians do this in practical ways. John tells us that if we are really walking in the light and in close relationship with God, we will not hate anyone. Jesus, indeed, said that the mark of a set of true disciples is that they love one another (John 13:35). James 2:18 makes it clear that if faith is real then it will result not just in words but in practical action to help those in need. In the UK much social action has been Christian-motivated: the wonderful work of the Salvation Army and the recent founding, for example, of the ‘Street Pastors’ to help people on the streets came from just such an impetus. Our practical action is closely linked with our close relationship with God through Jesus.

Christians are also aware that there is warfare on the spiritual level. Spiritual forces, good and evil, are real, and in *God’s Path to Victory* we traced this warfare. A leading spiritual entity of evil is called *haśśātān* = ‘the satan’ or ‘the opponent’, who *accuses* God to humankind (Genesis 3:5) and humankind to God (Job 1:11). The Greek term for him is *diabolos* = the devil, and Jesus addresses *diabolos* during the temptations by the Hebrew *satan* (Matthew 4:10).

Satan is symbolically portrayed as a seven-headed dragon (note, *not* a Welsh or Chinese dragon which has only one head!), and as a serpent. Genesis 3 begins this idea, and in 3:15 God declares war on the serpent and on his ‘offspring’. Jesus identifies the serpent’s offspring not as literal snakes but his human opponents whose ‘father’ is the devil in Matthew 12:34, 23:33 and John 8:44.

The spiritual warfare theme is seen in the battle for the mind of Job, and also in Daniel. In the Apocalypse, the warfare of the good and evil forces is graphically portrayed (*eg* Revelation 12:7–9), but we know the final outcome is God’s victory which has already been won in Christ. So we read, *eg*:

Revelation 20: ² He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³ and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended.

At the present time, the church is told in Ephesians 1:3 and 2:6 that we have been blessed and made to sit in the ‘heavenly places’ in and with Christ. But this is not for a life of repose. In Ephesians 6:12 Paul says that it is in the ‘heavenly places’ that the battle rages against spiritual hosts of wickedness.

Biblical Bases for Key Doctrines

Christians are to stand against these not in our own armour but in God's armour. Along with this we are to pray *at all times*. This is not just on Sundays, at prayer meetings and in our 'quiet time'. Our warfare is partly in our own minds and spirits, but in prayer in the Spirit we also stand in the name of Jesus against the many evil spiritual forces affecting our world. Times of fasting can also help us focus our minds and spirits, but none of this can be in our own strength, but only in the power and armour of God.

More on prayer can be found in Roger Forster's book *Prayer: Living in the Breath of God*.

14. Christian Leadership

*In Christ there is no longer male and female, slave and free,
Jew and Gentile*

Galatians 3: ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

There are theologians who assert that ‘leadership is male’, and women should not be church leaders or pastors, but many church groups today (including my own) do have female leaders. So is this simply because of a desire to ‘move with the times’ and to take the church’s standards from the world?

The answer to this is ‘no’. Many in churches in which there are female leaders believe that this is fully in accord with New Testament teaching. Churches which differ on the proper role of women in leadership can surely continue to work together in propagating the gospel, but here will be set out some reasons for Christian leadership to be gender inclusive. This chapter is really just to address this particular question, though it does touch on some more general leadership issues.

Actually, the present author was brought up in a Brethren tradition where leadership was male and women only taught or led worship in an all-female context. Much in that tradition was valued, particularly emphasis on deeper Bible study, but later a conclusion was reached that the male–female aspects were not in accordance with New Testament teaching. Whatever your tradition or present view of this, we can think about it together. My book *Women in Church Leadership and in Marriage* explores this in detail, but a brief summary is here. If at times it seems a bit ‘technical’ in examining the various leadership terms used in the New Testament, this reflects a sincere concern that theology should be truly biblical and not merely due to emotion or cultural fashion.

It should also be pointed out that acceptance of women leaders in our stream and tradition long predates the modern secular focus on ‘equal rights’ – eg Susannah Wesley and then John Wesley (eighteenth century), B. T. Roberts (founder of Free Methodism, late nineteenth century), the American holiness

movement (nineteenth to twentieth centuries), the Salvation Army Catherine Booth (nineteenth century) and the (Wesleyan) Church of the Nazarene (late nineteenth century) all moved in this direction from biblical principles. It is not novel.

From the biblical perspective, of course, all twelve apostles chosen by Jesus were Jewish, male and free men: there were no Gentiles, women or slaves. So is this how Jesus meant church leadership to stay? As the Christian gospel came ‘to the Jew first and also to the Gentile’ the exclusively Jewish leadership changed. Should the same apply to the male–female and slave–free distinctions?

Well, Jesus already gave hints of changes in all areas. In Matthew 8:10 he said that the Gentile centurion had greater faith than any Jew he had come across. He first revealed his messiahship to a disreputable Gentile woman in John 4, a woman who became a kind of ‘missionary’ to the men in her village. He insisted that a woman could ‘sit at his feet’ (a Jewish expression meaning a disciple of a master) like the men did (Luke 10:39, 42). After the resurrection, Jesus first appeared to a group of women, and told them to go and tell the male twelve apostles what to do (Matthew 28:10). All very strange if, as some claim, ‘leadership is male’.

There were, of course, no ‘priests’ in the New Testament church – though the whole church (male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free) were a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9; see also Revelation 1:6).

Anyone looking at what leadership roles there were in the New Testament church, needs to be aware of two basic points. First, the situation was fluid, and roles and functions could emerge as the church became more established. Secondly, Paul often uses male language when in fact it is inclusive. For example:

Romans 5: ¹² Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men (*anthrōpous*), because all sinned. (NASB)

Plainly women sinned as well as men and death spread to them too – the male term is meant to be gender-inclusive. In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 women were prophesying and so were included in the (male) term ‘prophets’. There is actually no female word form for ‘deaconess’ in the New Testament. When Paul commends Phoebe in Romans 16:1 he calls her a deacon (minister), not a deaconess. In the UK before about 1970 male language could likewise be

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used inclusively, *eg* in a book about scientists the word ‘he’ might be used for an unnamed scientist though the author was perfectly aware that many top scientists were female.

The leadership and ministry roles and positions mentioned in the church are these:

***prophētēs* (prophet):**

In the Old Testament it says:

Judges 4: ⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.

Later in 2 Kings 22:14 the prophetess Huldah was similarly authoritative. A central prophecy of the New Covenant is that:

Joel 2: ²⁸ Then afterwards 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 (quoted in Acts 2:17).

In Acts it says:

Acts 21: ⁸ The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him.⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

In the Corinthian church Paul indicates that women should wear a ‘head covering’ (one presumes a *hymatia* or headscarf) when prophesying in the public worship service, to show their authority to do so in their culture. They are included in his instruction to ‘let two or three prophets speak’.

***presbutēs* (= old man)**

This is used three times. In Luke 1:18 and in Philemon 9 (Paul referring to himself!) it means ‘old man’. The plural *presbutas* is used in Titus 2:2 - followed by the female form *presbutidas* in Titus 2:3.

***presbuteros* (= old man, elder, presbyter)**

This can mean either ‘older man’ or an ‘elder’, in some sense implying authority or seniority, and the connotation is not always clear.

This is apparent in the ways in which the following passage is translated:

1 Tim 5: ¹ Do not speak harshly to an older man (*presbuterō*) but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers,² to older women (*presbuteras*) as mothers, to younger women as sisters – with absolute purity . . . ¹⁷ Let the elders (*presbuteroi*) who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; ¹⁸ for the scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain’, and, ‘The labourer deserves to be paid.’ ¹⁹ Never accept any accusation against an elder (*presbuterou*) except on the evidence of two or three witnesses

Most English-language translations render the same Greek word in verse one as ‘older man’, and in 17 and 19 as ‘elder’. The NRSV has a note, ‘Or an elder, or a presbyter’ on ‘older man’ in verse 1, but no such note on the feminine form of the same word that immediately follows. Moreover, in 17–19 in the same chapter, Paul is speaking of elders ‘ruling’ and ‘preaching and teaching’, and that accusations against them are especially serious. Surely here he is talking about appointed or recognised elders leading the church? But the exact same terms are used as in verse 1.

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul is differentiating between some gender groups, and so specifically uses the female form of ‘elder’. But his normal practice was to use male word forms to include both genders. Modern translations render his repeated use of *adelphoi* (literally ‘brothers’) as ‘brothers and sisters’, which is plainly what he meant though he never writes ‘*adelphoi kai adelphai*’. We have already noted in Romans 5:12 that he used the male form (men), but of course death came to women as well as to men. This means he would be unlikely to write ‘*presbuteroi kai presbuterai*’ for elders of both genders, but would simply use the male form. Very likely in their primarily Jewish culture free Jewish men would have predominated in early church leadership, but maybe there were indications that this was not how it was meant to stay. ‘Elders’ could include women.

The fuzziness between ‘elder people’ and ‘elders’ is reflected in another key verse:

Acts 2: ¹⁷ ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men (*presbuteroi*) shall dream dreams’. (NRSVA)

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So is Peter really intending ‘dreaming dreams’ to be restricted to older *men* and not women in the New Covenant? We should note that dreaming dreams was a normal activity of prophets anyway as *eg* Numbers 12:6, Deuteronomy 13:1, 1 Samuel 26:15 and Jeremiah 23:28 make clear. Dreams were simply part of a prophet’s function, and elder women prophets (presumably like Deborah and Huldah) were no less likely to dream than elder men. So is Peter, then, really intending that in the *New Covenant* (when the Spirit is poured out onto *all* flesh) women will be *more* restricted than they were in the *Old Covenant*? Surely we must assume that although *presbuteroi* is masculine, as with so much of the apparently gender-specific language in the New Testament, it was the intention of neither Joel nor Peter to restrict it to men – even if, in their cultural context, leaders were more likely to be Jewish, male and free.

So were there indeed any specifically recognised female elders? Such an office was actually officially *abolished* in the Council of Laodicea in AD 325, so it must have previously existed.

***episkopos* (= officer/bishop)**

This is a general word for a high officer, and is used as such of Judas’ membership of the Twelve in Acts 1:20 and in 1 Peter 2:25 of Jesus himself as ‘the *episkopon* and shepherd of your souls’.

The other four New Testament references are to human officers. The *episkopoi* in *this context* are clearly the same group as elders:

Acts 20: ¹⁷ From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders (*presbuterous*) of the church to meet him . . . ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopous*), to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son

Titus 1: ⁵ I left you behind in Crete for this reason, that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders (*presbuterous*) in every town, as I directed you: ⁶ someone who is blameless, a one-woman man whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious. ⁷ For an overseer (*episkopon*) as God’s steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain (*our rendering*).

The idea that a ‘bishop’ (*episkopos*) was some kind of ruler or even a leader

or *primus inter pares* (first amongst equals) amongst the ‘elders’ (*presbuteroi*) is a later invention of the church. In the New Testament, the terms simply indicate different aspects of the same group. The *episkopos* term emphasises the caring function. It is actually difficult to use any single term for it in English because they all carry too much misleading baggage. The term ‘bishop’ is now totally misleading, as it means a senior figure in a hierarchy. The term ‘overseer’ sounds like an authority figure *eg* over slaves or wage-slaves in a factory – a connotation totally opposite to *episkopos*. The term ‘pastor’ is possible – with connotations of ‘shepherding’, but this is not really its fundamental meaning. The ‘visitation’ (which is a word from the same root) meaning going on *eg* in visiting needy widows or those in prison is not necessarily being done by ‘authority’ figures – the accent is on the practical caring actions (James 1:26).

Husband of one wife?

In 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:12 both elders/overseers and ministers are required to be ‘husband of one wife’ or ‘husbands of one wife’. Actually the word *andra* can mean either man or husband, and *gunē* can mean either woman or wife. So what does it mean? It could mean:

- (1) Husband of one wife
- (2) A one-woman man

The first has a lot of problems. Polygamy was not practised in the culture and is plainly not in view. But would it exclude a bachelor or a widower? Would it allow someone with one wife but two mistresses? How about someone who had divorced and remarried but whose previous wife was now dead?

Howard Marshall says that this should really read ‘a one-woman man’. (Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 477), and this makes much more sense. The focus is on the present, not on the man’s past, and of course the ‘one woman’ is assumed to be a wife. One also assumes that Paul would not preclude a celibate bachelor, widower or divorcee – one of which Paul himself was according to 1 Corinthians 7.

What did elders/overseers do?

- (1) Acts 2:28, 1 Peter 5:2: *poimainō* (= shepherd/feed).
- (2) 1 Timothy 3:5: *epileomai* (= take care of).

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In the New Testament this is used elsewhere only in Luke 10:34–5, where the Good Samaritan asked the innkeeper to ‘take care of’ the injured man.

- (3) 1 Timothy 3:1, Titus 2:2: *didaktikos* (= apt to teach).

This form is used also in 2 Timothy 2:24 of the ‘slave of the Lord’. It is a general word for systematic ‘teaching’.

- (4) 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8: *philoxenon* (= given to hospitality).

- (5) 1 Timothy 5:17: *prohistemi* (= stand before/preside/rule).

***diakonos* (= minister)**

This term is just a general term for ‘servant’, and is used thus in the gospels. In one sense the whole church are ‘ministers of the New Covenant’ (2 Corinthians 3:6). Of individuals we find it applied to: Phoebe (Rom 16:1), Apollos and Paul (1 Corinthians 3:5, 2 Corinthians 11:23; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:23–5), Tychichus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), those who with the elders received the letter to the Philippians (Philippians 1:1), Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), Timothy (1 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Timothy 4:6) and a designated group (1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12). It was not some kind of junior post.

Our English word ‘deacon’ is really just a transliteration from the Greek word *diakonos* meaning ‘servant’, and the word ‘minister’ means a servant. 1 Timothy lists qualifications for Christian ‘ministers’:

1 Timothy 3: ⁸ Deacons [ministers] likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; ⁹ they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then if they prove themselves blameless let them serve as deacons. ¹¹ The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons [ministers] be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well . . .

Above we looked at the qualification for overseers and ministers – one of which was being a one-woman man. Paul is dealing in the most general terms, and surely would not want to rule out a celibate, unmarried bachelor or widower. But what about a woman?

The rendering in some versions for 1 Timothy 3:11, ‘wives’, is a possible translation of *gunaikas*, but as noted, the same word (from *gunē*) can simply mean ‘women’ (which is how, here, the NRSV, NASB and 2011 NIV render it). Here actually ‘wives’ seems unlikely. If it is really ‘wives’, then why only for ministers’ wives and not for those of overseers/elders too? More crucially, many commentators have pointed out that there is in the text no possessive pronoun ‘*their* wives’ – even though (as Gordon Fee notes) the old NIV helpfully inserted one ‘without any warrant whatsoever’ (see the list in Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 493; also Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, p. 88). When Paul means specifically husbands and wives, the definite article may be used, eg Colossians 3:18–19; Ephesians 5:24–5. Sometimes, where added clarity is needed, he also uses either the word for possession (*heautōn*), as in 1 Corinthians 7:2, Ephesians 5:28, or the word for ‘private’ (*idiois*), as in 1 Corinthians 7:2; 14:25, Ephesians 5:22, 24 (also 1 Peter 3:1, 5). There are, of course, places where (eg 1 Corinthians 7:10) the implication of husband–wife is so strong that this is not needed, but where instruction is given to wives as distinct from women (eg Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1) the writer tends to make it clear.

Now in 1 Timothy 2:9 the phrase:

Likewise also women . . .

is not taken by anyone to refer only to the wives of the men mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:8; rather it refers to women in general, including widows.

There are similar phrases in 1 Timothy 3:8 and 3:11:

Ministers likewise grave . . .

Women likewise grave . . .

and the context here is of leadership, so presumably it is unlikely that the writer means all women in general.

There is, in the New Testament, no feminised word ‘deaconess’ – Phoebe is called a ‘deacon’ or minister using the male form in Romans 16. How it reads is that the writer (as was normal, as we have seen) is happily using the male gender language, maybe thinking of the more usual ministers as being male, when he remembers that there are probably women ministers in Ephesus too. He can’t say ‘Likewise deaconesses . . .’ because the male gender form of the

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word deacon/minister was used for women, so he writes just ‘Likewise women’, implying women ministers.

So in the understanding of the present author, commentators like Marshall in his detailed commentary are right to conclude that these are not ‘wives’ of ministers but women ministers.

So what did ministers/deacons do? It is commonly assumed that they were a kind of junior post to elders, but the evidence for this is not all that good relating to this first-century period. The Acts 6 group are not called ‘deacons’ (ministers), in reality they were selected as Hellenistic rather than Hebraic Jews, and Philip clearly had an evangelistic and pastoral role. The list given above of those called ‘ministers’ includes some eminent people – and Timothy himself is called a ‘minister’ in this very same letter:

1 Timothy 4: 6 If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant [minister] of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.

This seems to imply that being a minister (here rendered ‘servant’) does not involve only some kind of ‘practical’ charity work. Rather, a part of it seems to be giving ‘instruction’ (though the word means ‘put in remembrance of right teachings’) and being ‘nourished in sound doctrines’. The immediate context is combating the false teaching of (i) demons (ii) forbidding marriage (iii) forbidding meat (iv) ‘profane old wives’ fables’. The latter, of course, are not harmless ideas without foundation (*eg* put salt on a wart and it will go away), but the kind of fables abounding in aspects of proto-Gnostic heresy, which involved demons and a belief that the physical world had been created by some kind of inferior god. The minister/deacon, then, here has a role in reasserting and expounding good apostolic doctrine. Founding Free Methodist pastor B. T. Roberts (*Ordaining Women*, ch. xvii) pointed out that often the ‘ministers’ (including those in Acts 6) did preach, and there is no indication anywhere of one who did not.

***apostolos* (= envoy, ambassador, messenger)**

This can be used in different senses. Jesus chose and appointed twelve (John 15:16) to go and bear fruit, and said that they were to be his witnesses because they ‘had been with him from the beginning’ (15:26). Paul clearly regarded himself as having some special apostolic authority parallel to the Twelve (*eg* in 1 Corinthians 15:7–9). But the term is also used in a general

sense in which we might now use the term ‘missionary’. In this context a woman, Junia (or Junias), is described as a prominent missionary (apparently with her husband Andronicus) in Romans 16:6 (on this, see our *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians*).

So what functions did women have in the church?

Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila (and he is sometimes mentioned second) undertook the teaching of Christian doctrine to the learned Jewish Christian rabbi Apollos (Acts 18:26). Junia was an apostle/missionary (Romans 16:7). Paul tells the Roman church to welcome the lady minister Phoebe as is fitting, adding that she has been a ‘benefactor’ to many, including himself (Romans 16:1). In our *Paul’s Gospel in Romans & Galatians* we explained how the term ‘benefactor’ has implications of leading up front. Plainly there were women in Corinth who led in praying and prophesying in their main meeting.

OK, so what about:

1 Corinthians 14: ³³ As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.

The word ‘speak’, if taken literally, would include joining in singing, and very few churches forbid women to join in congregational singing. So what else can the context tell us about Paul’s meaning? He has already mentioned women in these public meetings praying and prophesying in chapter 11, and advised the wearing of the head covering (sometimes misleadingly translated ‘veil’) to show their authority to do so. For him now to say here that they cannot do either would be very odd, and of course a woman who leads in this way does not ‘want to know anything’. What seems most likely is that he is addressing the apparent chaos rampant in their meetings; and maybe Chloe’s people (1 Corinthians 1:11) had reported that women were chatting during the services, discussing what various prophets were saying. His remark about asking men at home could not, in any case, apply to Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11) and Lydia (Acts 16) who seem to have had their own households in which churches met. It seems, then, in view of all this, that Paul is insisting on order, not denying appropriate women a ministry.

The other interesting passage is:

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1 Timothy 2: ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹² I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵ Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

A detailed analysis of this passage is given in my *Women in Church Leadership and in Marriage* but here is a very brief treatment.

The word ‘teach’ (*didache*) does not mean to pray or prophesy, but it is hard to see in what respect it differs from the activity of Priscilla in ‘explaining’ (*exethentō*) to Apollos the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:26). The only suggestion that seems to make sense of all this may be that at this stage in the church’s development there was, as yet, no canon of the New Testament. At this stage the particular essence of good teaching (*didache*) was to ensure faithful reproduction of the apostles’ doctrine. We do not today have any ‘authoritative’ source of Christian teaching other than the New Testament. Even if someone deduced that women were never to undertake *didache* in this first-century sense, there seems no reason for them not to *exethentō* or explain the way of God more accurately to us today. In Jewish terms, ‘prophesy’ would also include expounding and applying Scripture, so female prophets could also do this. Actually the word *didaskō* (teach) is applied anyway to women in Titus 2:3, so we need to look at its context to decide what exactly was disallowed.

The word ‘silence’ (*hesychia*) in classical Greek and the LXX means quietness in contrast to war (Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. iii, p. 111) and in its only other New Testament use (2 Thessalonians 4:11) a ‘life of tranquillity’ rather than agitated theological busybodies pursuing the latest ‘signs’. The emphasis is on tranquillity, not physical silence. This might be contrasted *eg* with ‘busybodiness’ (*cf* 1 Timothy 5:13).

Hypotagē (submission) is not the usual term for the ‘subjection’ of wife to husband (*hypotassō*). *Hypotagē* is used only in 2 Corinthians 9:13, Galatians 2:5 and 1 Timothy 2:11, 3:4. Interestingly only *children* (not wives) in 1 Timothy 3:4 are to be *hypotagē* to fathers, whereas mothers are ‘despots of the household’ (1 Timothy 5:14). In Corinthians it is the ‘submission of your confession to the good news of Christ’, whilst in Galatians it concerns Paul’s right refusal to ‘submit’ to false legalistic doctrines ‘so that the truth of the

good news' might remain with them. This is about 'submission' to the true gospel, rather than false teaching. It seems unlikely that this is about wifely subjection to husband, for he would then have used the regular word *hypotassō*. 1 Timothy 1:3–4 has already spoken of alternative teachings about Jewish-Gnostic type genealogies and myths, and 1 Timothy 5:13 seems to refer to young widows' involvement in the kinds of idle 'busybodying' that had been a problem in 2 Thessalonians 3:11 – though in the latter case it was men doing it . . .

The usual word for 'authority' in the New Testament (107 times) and in Pauline writings (31 times) is *exousian* or its cognates. This never (especially in the Pauline writings) seems to mean naked power, but constituted authority – even when we are to 'wrestle' against spiritual forces who misuse their authority that ultimately came from the Son of God (Ephesians 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Colossians 1:13; 1:16; 2:10; 2:15). This is the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11:10 to speak of the woman's 'authority' to publicly pray or prophesy, embodied, as we have seen, in her head-covering. Paul also uses it in a context of an authority of himself as an apostle, over those in the church, to receive material benefit from them (1 Corinthians 9:12, 18; 2 Thessalonians 3:9). Had he in 1 Timothy 2:12 meant to say that women should not have any constituted authority over men, there is absolutely no reason not to use this common term *exousian*. Instead, the word actually used is a rare word, *authentēin* (from the equally rare verb *authentēō*).

What does the term mean? The important clues are in its use in the LXX book of *Wisdom* with which Paul was familiar, and also in classical Greek usage. In these there are connotations of infanticide, violent seizure and murder. It seems, then, to imply a violent seizure, not a legitimate use of authority.

In the Timothy context, there is submission to the apostolic doctrine first given to free Jewish men. The kind of serious heresies some were pushing in Timothy's church were a violent seizure of authority. But finally the writer adds that women will be saved 'through the childbearing'. His switch in this verse from plural to singular indicates that 'the childbearing' is Mary – a kind of counterpart to Eve – bearing 'the child' without any male help. 'The childbearing' refers to the birth of the Messiah in whom there would be neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile. This is what will bring equality to slaves, Gentiles and women.

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In Christ there is no bar to leadership based on race, gender or social position. At the same time, Christians should be aware that there is a need to be sensitive to local cultural conditions. In some societies it may be advisable for churches to place men in the key figurehead roles, as long as the underlying theology is not denied and is applied wherever practical.

As already noted, there was no group in the New Testament church nominated as 'priests' because in the New Covenant all would know God directly (Jeremiah 31:34, Hebrews 8:11) and the whole church was a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Every Christian should be ministering God to fellow Christians. There is no indication that the 'ordination' (or appointment) of elders conferred some kind of lifelong change in status. They did not wear special clothes, neither did they set much store by honorific titles (Matthew 23:8), although of course God did use people in his church by giving them particular ministry gifts. Moreover, Christian leaders are worthy of honour and respect (1 Timothy 5:17), and great care needs to be taken in speaking about or even more, bringing any accusation against them. Wherever possible Christian leaders, Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, should be supported.

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God made them at the beginning male and female, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh

Matthew 19: ⁴ He answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female”,⁵ and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?’⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

Christians who want to live in a society where they are free to follow their own pattern of faith generally support the idea of a multi-cultural society in which they accept that others may have beliefs and lifestyles with which they disagree. These others may be seen as valuable members of society, and there should be no prejudice against them in terms of work or (as Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10) in the Christians’ social contact. But this does not mean that all such lifestyles are approved by God, nor that they can be followed by consistent disciples of Jesus. Thus, though Christians have Hindu friends and respected colleagues, Christians believe that worship of Ganesh is idolatry and is not in line with a lifestyle approved by God. Likewise Christians may have friends who have sexual lifestyles which are not in line with the teaching of Jesus, but this does not nullify the friendship and respect in which they may be held. Within Christian families, children may learn from an early age that many friends at school may be from families whose beliefs and lifestyles diverge from what Jesus taught, and that this is part of living in a free society.

Matthew 19 contains Jesus’ key teaching on sex and marriage. As previously noted, Jesus was not a ‘literalist’ in regard to the creation accounts in Genesis - *eg* he sees the offspring of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 as the ‘brood of vipers’ who were his human opponents. But he does regard the creation passages as inspired indications of God’s intention for marriage. So we note first that Jesus deliberately joins together the ‘male and female’ from Genesis 1:27 with the leaving and bonding of marriage in Genesis 2. In doing so he seems to imply that marriage was intended to be between male and female. Secondly, Jesus also inserts the word ‘two’ in verse 5. This had been added in

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the Greek Septuagint translation in use at the time because by then it was recognised that God did not intend polygamy. Finally Jesus implies that the ‘one flesh’ nature of the bond was intended to be permanent. It would seem then, that according to Jesus, God intended marriage to be monogamous, permanent, faithful and heterosexual. He goes on to say to the disciples that if someone cannot enter this kind of a marriage with this intention or permanence then they can choose to stay single and celibate for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Finally, it can be noted that the implication of his words in the wider passage show that he regarded any sex outside such a marital relationship to be wrong. Those Christians who, whether they are same-sex attracted or opposite-sex attracted, do not find anyone they can share with in marriage as Jesus taught it, can choose to remain celibate for the Kingdom of God. Those who do should be valued and given family love and support by the church, and may be as likely to become giants of the faith as anyone else. None of this is to say that the path for such Christians will be easy, and pastoral empathy, love and concern should always be central.

Elsewhere in Matthew Jesus also notes that *lust* is in some moral senses equivalent to adultery (Matthew 5:28). But care should be taken here. Someone may feel an *attraction* towards a person with whom marriage according to Jesus’ definition is not possible. Maybe this attraction could turn to *temptation* – though temptation in itself is not sin because Scripture says Jesus himself was tempted as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Temptation is still not yet *lust*, which implies a kind of imagining, revelling in, and as it were drooling over the unobtainable. It is this that Jesus pronounces as being sinful, like the act itself. A sexual lifestyle (actual or habitually lustful) can be a hindrance to full engagement in Christian life and leadership, but the attraction or sexual orientation in itself need not be.

The apostles, in particular Paul, indicate similar understandings within the context of the Jewish teachings on marriage. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 he wrote

⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (NIV)

All the lifestyles in verse 9 are legal in our society, but Paul says they are not consistent with being a disciple of Jesus in the Kingdom of God. The NIV here well translates the terms Paul uses there. The first word *pornoi* is indeed

a general word for sexual immorality. The final term, *arsenokoitēs*, simply means male-on-male sex. Paul repeats the Septuagint Greek term used in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 where it lists male homosexual acts, along with various other sexual deviations, as sins of the Canaanites (though the latter are never castigated for eating pork or breaking Jewish ritual laws). These unacceptable sexual lifestyles are not, of course, ‘special sins’, and are listed alongside lifestyles of greed, drunkenness, slander and swindling. We are all sometimes tempted and sin in thought or deed, but what Paul is saying is that as *lifestyles* these are all inconsistent with discipleship of Jesus.

How should Christians regard those in our society who have chosen such lifestyles? Christians are to love them as we love all neighbours, with practical love, and support wherever possible. Any kind of bullying or verbal abuse should be anathema to Christians. They should be welcomed into our Christian communities with love, though without condoning their lifestyles. People do not have to reform their lifestyle first to become Christians, but when they become Christians should be open to allowing God to convict and empower them to (as Paul prayed in 1 Colossians 1:10) lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as they bear fruit in every good work and as they grow in the knowledge of God.

Returning to Matthew 19, sometimes it has been claimed that Jesus also absolutely forbade remarriage after divorce in this passage, so a church (like my own) which in some circumstances allows this is not being consistent with his teaching. We should note, however, that Jesus here was answering a specific question about divorce relating to the two different rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai. The question put to him in verse 3 was ‘can a man divorce his wife *for anything?*’ The Shammaites said a man could divorce his wife only for serious sexual deviance, whilst the Hillelites said he could divorce her ‘*for anything*’. In Jewish thinking getting rid of a wife was to remarry, so Jesus is answering the question: ‘On what grounds can I get rid of my wife and marry someone else?’ His answer is ‘Don’t do it!’ But he is *not* being asked the question: ‘My husband committed adultery, left me and remarried three years ago. I have two young children. Am I free to remarry to a Christian widower who has proposed to me?’ Jesus does not say that a marriage *cannot* be terminated (as some theologians have suggested), but that those contemplating terminating one should not do so unless for really serious reasons like adultery. Jesus does not here address the issue of whether a person is still bound by a marriage which has long since been terminated.

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Paul, however, does so. He is evidently applying the Jewish Torah guidance in 1 Corinthians 7:15 to a situation where someone has had no control over their spouse's divorcing them, and says that they are then 'free' (presumably free to remarry). More detailed exegesis on this is eg in my *Christians, Divorce & Remarriage*.

What is the relationship within Christian marriage?

Genesis 1: ²⁷ So God created humankind ('*ādām*) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male (*zākār*) and female (*n^eqēbā*) he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Genesis 2: ⁷ then the Lord God formed man ('*ādām*) from the dust of the ground...¹⁸ Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner....' ²² And the rib (*tsēlā*) that the Lord God had taken from the man ('*ādām*) he made into a woman ('*iššā*) and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman ('*iššā*), for out of Man ('*iš*) this one was taken.' ²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife ('*iššā*), and they become one flesh.

Ephesians 5: ²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.²² Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church,³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'³² This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. ³³ Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Genesis teaches that both men and women were made in God's image. The word translated 'helper' in Genesis 2:18 really means an *ally*. It does not mean a servant, and it is most often used of God himself (*eg* Exodus 18:4, Deuteronomy 33:7, Psalm 20:2, 70:5, 115:9–11, 121:2, 124:8 and 146:5). God took from the 'side' (a better translation of *tsēlā* ') of the man to make a partner. In Genesis 1-3 the word *'ādām* is not a name, but means 'the man' or 'sometimes 'humankind' (as in Genesis 1:27). So humanity (*'ādām*) was split into male (*'iš*) and female (*'iššā*) and in marriage they reunite to make the complete marriage unit.

Children are told to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1), but nowhere in the New Testament, or indeed in the Bible, are wives told to obey their husbands. The New Testament does, however, have a concept of 'being subject' (*hupotasso*) which means 'set in order under'. In Ephesians 5:21 being subject to each other in different contexts is presented as a good feature of church life. Ephesians 5:22 then adds 'the wives to their own husbands as to the Lord because a man is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church his body.' Though translations insert it, the phrase 'be subject' is not actually repeated in this verse in the Greek. This indicates that it relates to a general Christian willingness to mutual subjection as in the verse 21.

The husband is not said to be the head of the household, but the head of the wife. The word 'head' (*kephalē*) is not a synonym for ruler. It is used *eg* the 'head' of a river – something very much a part of that river. In this context Paul is emphasising the organic unity of the bonded man and woman in marriage. In general, our heads and bodies only disagree when we are dysfunctional. If I say 'I decided to go for a walk', it is just me who decides. In a similar way, if the husband and wife really are one organic unity then their decisions are made as a unit. If there really was an unresolvable disagreement, then headship could mean that the husband would decide, but there are marriages where such a thing is very rare. The emphasis is on organic unity not dissent. This has been my own experience in 47 years of marriage. Moreover, the husband is to love his wife *as Christ loved the church*. This is both a practical self-sacrificing love, and a desire to see the wife fully develop her own potentials and life. This is what Christ wants for his church – empowering Christians to reach their full potentials.

The husband is said by Paul to 'preside over' (*proistamenon*) (1 Timothy 3:4) his household, but the word used there does not mean to 'rule' or 'govern' in the normal sense. The church leadership 'preside over' the church (1 Timothy 3:5), but in a consensual way, as Acts 15 shows, and Phoebe is said to be a

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‘benefactor’ to many, *including Paul*, using a derivative (*prostatis*) of the same Greek root. Women, it seems, could also ‘preside over’ in the church.

In the gospels (eg Matthew 13:27) the man is described as the ‘ruler of the house’ (*oikodespotou*), but Paul’s only use of this strong term is when he uses the verbal form (*oikodespotein*) to encourage *women* to do the role (1 Timothy 5:14) and rule their households well.

Is ‘subjection’ sexist? We should note first that the Bible nowhere says that God gave headship to the man because he was better fitted for it. There is absolutely nothing in Scripture to suggest that the woman is inferior mentally, spiritually or psychologically. In many marriages we know very well that she is not. Could anyone seriously suggest that Deborah was inferior to Lapidoth (Judges 4:4)? That Huldah was inferior to Shallum (1 Kings 22:14)? That Abigail was inferior to Nabal (1 Samuel 25)? The last is particularly absurd. Abigail was superior to Nabal in wisdom, initiative, beauty, charm, dignity, temperance and faith, and no lesser person than King David recognised it as he listened to her words and acted on them. The idea that all women are by nature inferior is a foolish pagan idea (held, for example, by some of the Greeks), and sometimes read in the past into the Scriptures by men too influenced by pagan thinking and male chauvinism. Moreover, the overlapping of the spectrums of features in men and women are so great that simple generalisations about men being from Mars and women from Venus are misleading. In the end, moreover, in Christ both men and women have the status of ‘sons of God’ (Romans 8:14, 8:19, Galatians 4:6, *etc*) and should be respected as such.

So in Christian marriage should be seen the restoration of partnership in marriage which was transformed by sin into all too frequent dominance and manipulation (Genesis 3:16). There should be the restoration of that organic unity and mutual love, upbuilding and support, where they function as one and are seen as such. Since they are one organism, and as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7 each ‘owns’ the other’s body, they should be sharing loving sexual activity regularly together – and in this the wife has as much right and authority as the husband. Paul’s vision is all very egalitarian in this aspect, and there is no concept (as Augustine later introduced) that sexual abstinence in marriage (apart from mutually agreed times of prayer and fasting) is in any way a good thing.

16. Judgement and Hell

Hell and Divine Judgement are a reality

Isaiah 66: ²⁴ “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” (NIV)

Matthew 12: ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter;

Mark 9: ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. ⁴⁹ ‘For everyone will be salted with fire.

Matthew 10: ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Luke 12: ⁴ ‘I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. ⁵ But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!’

Matthew 23: ³³ You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

Matthew 25: ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

2 Corinthians 5: ¹⁰ For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

2 Thessalonians 1: ⁶ For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,

The other chapters in this book present doctrines which are commonly held by evangelicals, especially those intuitively or consciously sympathetic to the

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stream which could be called Wesleyan-Arminian and charismatic. The present chapter will give the biblical bases for an understanding of hell and judgement which may be less common even amongst this stream.

Firstly then, judgement and hell must be real because Jesus above all others spoke about them. Christians should, however, be sure to derive their understanding of judgement and hell from Scripture and not from tradition which is not always a good guide to biblical truth.

The first point to make is that there is a great difference between the two Greek words *hades* and *gehenna* (and their equivalent Hebrew words *sheol* and *Ge Hinnon*). For this reason they will here be considered separately.

Hades (the grave)

The word *hades* simply means ‘the grave’. It is the interim place where people await the final judgement day. In our book *God’s Path to Victory* we looked in detail at this. Throughout its use in the Old Testament, the Hebrew equivalent term *sheol* seems to be the place where the dead are unconscious. In later prophecies comes a powerful vision of the coming chosen one, the Messiah, and Isaiah contains a powerful vision of a resurrection:

Isaiah 26: ⁴ The dead do not live; shades do not rise – because you have punished and destroyed them . . .

¹⁹ Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead [Hebrew = to the shades].

In Daniel we get the clearest Old Testament visions of what the Messiah and the saints will bring:

Daniel 12: ² Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

There is no indication in the Old Testament that in *sheol* (and the LXX consistently translates it with the Greek word *hades*) there is any consciousness.

In Luke 16:19–31 Jesus tells the parable about a rich man and a poor man who died and went to *hades*. In the parable the rich man is in torment, and begs either to get relief or be able to send a warning message to his brothers. Does this imply some kind of consciousness as the dead await the

resurrection and judgement day? There is much debate over this passage: is it a parable, or is Jesus giving us a glimpse of what the immediate afterlife is like? The story is unique in that, unlike other parables, one of the characters, Lazarus, is named (the name means ‘whom God helps’), and for a parable it contains a remarkable amount of detail, leading some to suggest that Jesus is giving a historical account. However, even though the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not introduced as a parable, neither are the parables of the Unjust Steward or the Prodigal Son that come just before:

- A certain man had two sons . . . (Luke 15:11)
- There was a certain rich man who had a steward . . . (Luke 16:1)
- There was a certain rich man . . . (Luke 16:19)

The context and structure of the passage, and the fact that the description of a split place of the dead is unlike anything else in Scripture, indicate that it is most likely a parable based on some of the contemporary beliefs of the Pharisees against whom the parable was aimed. So rather than getting distracted by the details of the story, first of all we need to look for what the point of it was. What truth was Jesus trying to get across?

Was it to teach us about the nature of *sheol/hades*? Not really. The whole point was that the Pharisees should be listening to the Jewish Law and the Prophets, and that their lives should therefore be lives full of love and compassion (unlike the Rich Man). The sting was in the point that if they do not repent because of Moses and the prophets, they will not repent even if someone rises from the dead. Jesus is saying that nothing changes after death – the righteous are still righteous and the unrighteous are still unrighteous. David Powys, in *‘Hell’: A Hard Look at a Hard Question*, suggests that this passage differs so radically from teaching elsewhere in the Synoptics because it is a thrust at the Pharisees, using their own imagery. Just before this, Luke 16:14 says that the Pharisees were lovers of money, and Matthew 23 bemoans their lack of compassion. In their eyes and theology the Pharisees were the ones off to the Bosom of Abraham – so Jesus tells a parable set in their two-part *sheol*, but the rich, uncaring Pharisee and the smelly, scabby beggar actually go the opposite ways from what they expect.

In our *God’s Path to Victory* we look in detail at some other verses sometimes cited, eg 1 Peter 3:18, Luke 23:43 and Philippians 1:21–4. None of these seem to us to give any definite indication of what happens between death and the resurrection.

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So *is* there some kind of consciousness in *hades*? The balance of Scripture seems to indicate not, though it is impossible to be dogmatic as there is so little about it in the New Testament.

What is one to make of those who claim to have had near-death or indeed technically *actual* death visions of some kind of other world? Christians may be wary of being dogmatic on this – noting that even the great apostle Paul was unwilling to decide whether or not a visionary experience in the third heaven was ‘in the body or out of the body’ (2 Corinthians 12:2).

Hades is, in any event, not ‘hell’, but the place of awaiting judgement. If it really is a place of ‘torment’ for the unrighteous then this is not endless.

Gehenna (hell)

The Greek word for hell is *gehenna*. Maybe, as knowledge of the Biblical languages was lost, people read about the rich man in torment and assumed it was ‘hell’. However, the terms *hades* and *gehenna* are totally distinct, and the Bible never uses the phrase ‘eternal torment’. So is some kind of ‘unending suffering’ what the New Testament means by *gehenna*?

Jesus is actually the only one who refers to *gehenna*/hell (apart from a metaphorical use in James 3:6 about the tongue), and hell must be real because Jesus said it was real.

Christians are sometimes asked whether or not they believe in a ‘literal hell’, but this question is ambiguous. If by literal the questioner means that it is *real*, then the answer should be ‘yes’; but if they mean *physical*, then ‘no’. To equate the real with the physical is clearly a mistake. Did Jesus mean Nicodemus to be literally physically born again? Did he give the woman at the well literal physical water? Did he mean us to literally physically eat his body and drink his blood? In each case the answer is no, but in each case what is referred to is real. Jesus gave the Samaritan woman in John 4 ‘real water’ because spiritual water is more real than physical water; but it was not H₂O. The fire of *gehenna* is surely ‘real’, but it is not a process of physical combustion involving an absorption of oxygen.

The key question is: what did Jesus *mean* by *gehenna*? The term comes from the Jewish word for the Valley of Hinnom, which was the rubbish dump south of Jerusalem where rubbish was consumed. In this sense the worms were always there and the fires burned constantly. The original use of the phrase was in Isaiah 66:24, where it was the dead carcasses that were being consumed with worms that don’t die and fire that is not quenched. The

Hebrew word carcass (*peger*) specifically means an inanimate unfeeling corpse, and the point there was not that the dead bodies were in some kind of torment but that those who noted it would remember their fate. The corpses were totally destroyed and consumed. Jesus picks up this vivid image in his warning in Mark 9:33–50, which actually seems to be addressed not to unbelievers but to his disciples. The context seems to be about being led into sin, or causing a believing ‘little one’ to stumble – there is nothing here about being cast into hell for not believing in Jesus. Jesus, moreover, never uses the term ‘eternal torment’. His reference in Matthew 10:28 is to body and soul (*psuchēn*) being destroyed (*apolesai*) in hell (*gehenna*). So what does this mean?

The word *psuchēn* is a concept with a long history and in English is more usually written ‘psyche’. The online Oxford Thesaurus defines this as:

soul, spirit, innermost self, true being, essential nature, life force, vital force, inner man, inner woman, persona, identity, personality, individuality, make-up, subconscious, mind, intellect

Really *psuchē* is the essential being itself.

The word ‘destroy’ (*apolesai*) is from *apollumi*, which commonly means to destroy utterly. As with many words *apollumi* has some range of meanings including eg to be ‘lost’ (cf Luke 15:6-8). It does *not* mean to be left in a state of suffering, and it *does* commonly mean to destroy/obliterate. Herod sought to obliterate the Christ child (Matthew 2:13), and Sodom was obliterated by fire from heaven (Luke 17:29). Sodom was not left in some kind of state of suffering; rather, everyone in it was obliterated from this world, and 2 Peter 2:6 compares their catastrophe with the future ultimate fate of the unrepentant. In temporal terms *apollumi* is used of death as the cessation of existence in this life (eg Matthew 22:7, 27:20, Luke 13:3 *etc*). Humans can kill and destroy your body, but not your essential being (*psuchē*). In contrast, Jesus says that in *gehenna* God can destroy both the body and the *psuchē*. Humans can end your existence in this life, but only God can destroy your essential being in the judgement of *gehenna*.

To illustrate this, Jesus picks up the graphic Isaiah description of the bodies being consumed by maggots and fire on a rubbish dump. On such a dump the fire and worms are continual but a particular body is destroyed and ceases to exist. When Jesus refers to God destroying (*apolesai*) both body and *psuchē* the most natural way to take this is that this too is a process leading to the

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non-existence or obliteration of the *psuchē* as well as the body. The process itself may be unpleasant but is not endless. Those of us who believe, then, that *gehenna* totally destroys the entire being, are taking in their most natural sense the words of Jesus – the only one who speaks of the real *gehenna*. We certainly do believe in hell, but also that it is as Jesus described it.

Some may object that this is not the ‘traditional’ view of hell, but are traditions always good? Well at one time the traditions coming from Augustine amongst Catholics and leading Reformed Protestants said it was acceptable to torture other Christians to enforce particular doctrines. One leader, close to Luther, asked why we should pity ‘heretics’ more than did God, who sent them to eternal torment. So, Anabaptists, who would not baptise babies or accept the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, were tortured, imprisoned and killed. There were always those who objected to this, and conservative evangelical Christians today generally accept that these Catholic and Reformed traditions of persecution were simply wrong and not in accord with the teaching of Jesus. Likewise there are growing numbers today within the conservative evangelical streams who are coming to realise that the idea that hell is eternal torment or unending suffering, rather than destruction, no more reflects the true teaching of Jesus than did the state churches’ torment or torture of nonconformists. Some ‘traditions’ are simply mistaken, and their rejection is not to do with cultural change or fashion but New Testament truth.

Other New Testament references to judgement are in these same terms of ‘destruction’. Paul speaks in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 of the ‘punishment of eternal destruction (*olethron aionion*) from (*apo*) the face of God’. In 1 Timothy 6:9 Paul links *othetron* with *apōleian* - a word derived from *apollumi*. For the finally impenitent, seeing the face of God is something from which they desperately want to hide (Revelation 6:16), so if there were such a thing as being ‘separated from God’ (as some say) then this would be a relief not a punishment. But, even back in Exodus 33:5 God said that if he really revealed his presence and face to the ungodly then it would utterly consume them. Paul notes in Romans 2 that the ‘day of wrath’ and judgement will bring anguish and pain (as stated elsewhere in Scripture), but the final end for the impenitent is total destruction (*apolountai*) (v.12) - which word again is from *apollumi*.

One of their favourite verses for many Christians is:

John 3: ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

The word ‘perish’ (*apolētai*) is yet again from *apollumi*. John did not say: ‘should not be in torment for endless time but may have eternal life’. The gift of eternal life, he says, is so that people may escape a final destruction.

In Revelation the ‘lake of fire’ (presumably *gehenna*) is described as the ‘second death’. Physical life in a body is continuous, but death is a process leading to a dissolution of the body. Second death is a similar process for the *psuchē* or ‘soul’.

Human judges can give punishments including death which relate just to ending this life. The second death is a punishment which has a *permanent* effect, an effect for eternity. In this sense, the *apollumi* of the *psuchē* is permanent, eternal, final.

The contrast between temporal punishment and eternal punishment is also reflected when Jesus uses the latter phrase (its only use) in Matthew 25:46. R. T. France, in his great detailed conservative commentary on Matthew, states:

In the debate among evangelical theologians on the issue of annihilation as against continuing punishment, the phrase ‘eternal punishment’ here in Matt 25:46 is commonly cited as a proof-text for the latter position. But this is usually on the assumption that ‘eternal’ is a synonym for ‘everlasting.’ That assumption depends more on modern English usage than on the meaning of *aiōnios*, which we have seen to be related to the concept of the two ages. ‘Eternal punishment’ so understood is punishment which relates to the age to come rather than punishment which continues forever, so that the term does not in itself favour one side or the other in the annihilationist debate. Insofar as the metaphor of fire may be pressed, however, it suggests destruction rather than punishment, especially if the incineration of rubbish is understood to underlie the idea of hell (see 5:22); the fire of Gehenna goes on burning not because the rubbish is not destroyed by it, but because more is continually added. (*The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 966.)

Looking at all Jesus’ pictures of judgement in Matthew, France concludes that ‘eternal punishment’ is not ‘punishment which goes on forever’, but ‘punishment which has eternal consequences’.

Corrupt human judges may destroy the body, but this punishment relates only to this life. The divine judge destroys the very being (soul) in *gehenna* and this is an eternal punishment. As mentioned, Matthew 25:4 has the only use

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of this phrase ‘eternal punishment’, and actually Jesus does not say this judgement is because they did not believe in him but because their lifestyle did not show compassion to his people. He never ‘knew’ them (Matthew 7:23) because a real relationship with him would have been reflected in lifestyles of compassion. In *God’s Path to Victory* we show how this is reconciled with salvation by grace through faith, but it is a point often skated over. Jesus also refers (in Matthew 13:42) to the angels throwing the wicked to be consumed into the ‘furnace of fire’ and that this will be like weeds that are consumed with fire (13:40). So do weeds suffer ‘eternal torment’ in the fire? The word ‘consumed’ is *katakaio*, which means to consume utterly. So Jesus says the wicked are totally destroyed (*apollumi*) and utterly consumed (*katakaio*), and it requires a forced sense of his terms to take this to somehow mean an unending torment.

What is the fire of *gehenna*? One plausible view (though this is not provable from Scripture) it is the love of God. Christians are also told that their works in upbuilding the church will be ‘tried by fire’ (1 Corinthians 3:13ff). This may again be reflected in Mark 9:49, which in most manuscripts follows one of the very rare New Testament references to the fire of *Gehenna* with the comment that *everyone* will be salted with fire. When what we have done is brought to the pure love of God, anything we have not done in love will be destroyed – even if (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13) it is great faith, martyrdom or sacrificial philanthropy. In the end the wrath and the love of God are the same thing – it is the effect that differs. Those of us who have opened ourselves continually to the transforming love of God in this life have nothing to fear from the fire of his love at the judgement (1 John 4:17–18). Those who have consistently rejected it will be consumed. Reference has already been made to the ‘lake of fire’ in Revelation which most commentators take to be similar to *gehenna*, though Scripture is not explicit. Of humans, those not in the Book of Life (20:15) were cast into the lake of fire – though there is no mention of continued suffering. Also cast into this lake were the devil, the beast, the false prophet, death and *hades* (19:20, 20:10, 20:14), and the first three of these will suffer day and night ‘forever and ever’. Are they all individuals? Are *hades* and *death* individuals, or does this represent the utter destruction of these things? Revelation is full of imagery; the bride and the city both represent the church, for example, so it is hard to interpret dogmatically. Maybe Satan has been made immortal and will experience the pain of the love of God eternally, but one cannot be

dogmatic because, for example, there *is* no ‘day and night’ in the new order of reality.

In Revelation 14:11 the worshippers of the beast are tormented and ‘the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever’. What does this mean? The only Old Testament use of the phrase occurs in Isaiah 34:10: ‘smoke ascend forever’. Edom has been destroyed utterly, but although it speaks of burning pitch unquenched for night and day and the smoke going up forever, it is apparently to be inhabited by a whole menagerie of animals and birds, so this description does not represent unending retributive suffering for the Edomites, but irreversible destruction. So the more natural reading is that the smoke going up forever in Revelation 14 represents the memory of the torment of those who were consumed in the Lake of Fire.

In all this, the aim of Christians should be simply to follow the teaching of the New Testament and in particular of Jesus, who is the only one to talk about *gehenna*. This teaching seems inconsistent with a vision of unending torment of unbelievers. But what about ‘universalism’ – the idea that eventually everyone will be saved? Rob Bell, in *Love Wins*, refers to a ‘long tradition’ of Christians starting in the early church who believed that ‘no one can resist (God’s) pursuit forever, because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.’ (p.108) It would be nice to believe this, but it does not seem reconcilable with Jesus’ words about ‘destruction’ (*apollumi*) and with his sacrificial death to enable people who have faith not to ‘perish’. If a person’s *psuchē* and so conscious self has been destroyed, they cannot be able to repent at some later stage.

Outer darkness

In Matthew 8:12 Jesus has lamented the lack of faith in Israel and says that many Gentiles will come and take places in the Kingdom feast: *but the sons of the Kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*. Teeth gnashing in Scripture is not about pain but about regret and anguish, and maybe it is not *in* the furnace that this is happening forever but as the process takes place. Interestingly also, the term ‘sons of the Kingdom’ in Matthew 13:37 stands for the righteous who will shine like the sun. This illustrates the difficulty of understanding with any certainty such cryptic words, though the warning Jesus intends to make is clear enough.

In Matthew 22:13 Jesus tells the wedding feast parable, and says that the king comes and finds a man without a wedding garment: *bind him hand and foot*,

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and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are called but few are chosen. It seems that those mentioned earlier (one presumes the unfaithful Israel) who killed his servants are to be ‘destroyed’ (and the word is again from *apollumi*) and their city burned. It is apparently a *genuine* guest who has responded to the invitation who is cast into outer darkness. Is his exclusion permanent? It does not say. Is he to be kept in time-without-end misery whilst those who more directly rebelled are annihilated? This seems unlikely. Anyway, maybe this is why Peter later tells us to make *our* calling and election (chosenness) sure (2 Peter 1:10).

Another set of references to outer darkness comes in a set of parables in Matthew 24–5. The discourse begins in 24:3 when the disciples ask two questions (though they may think it is only one): ‘When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’ There is good basis for broad agreement with the view held by a significant number of scholars, and which R. T. France sets out in a detailed study in his *New International Commentary*. This is that in Matthew 24:4–35 Jesus is speaking of the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem; from 24:36 Jesus turns to the *parousia*, the second coming, but he does not answer their question as to the *sign* of his *parousia*, because he wants to emphasise that it will be unexpected. His fundamental point is verse 42: ‘Therefore keep watch, because you don’t know the day when your Lord will come . . .’

Jesus then tells three parables:

1. There is the ‘faithful and wise servant’ who is put in charge, who can choose either to behave well or to behave badly. If he chooses the latter then he will be ‘cut in pieces and assigned a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’.
2. There are the ten virgin bridesmaids, five of whom ran out of oil and were shut out of the wedding feast.
3. There is the parable of the ‘talents’, where the third servant is ‘lazy and wicked’ and is cast outside into the darkness ‘where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth’.

There are two key points about this. First, he is not speaking to the ‘crowds’ or to the ‘scribes and Pharisees’, but to his disciples. In the first parable, for example, there is no indication that the man is ‘not really’ a servant but only pretending to be. There is no indication that the foolish virgins are only pretending to be virgins, or that the third servant is not really a servant but

pretending to be. These three parables are not about unfaithful Israel, nor fake disciples, but warnings to his disciples to ‘keep watch’! Yet many people who try to insist that this is somehow about eternal torment are reluctant to go on to say that genuine Christians can suffer it. The same applies to the parallel in Luke 12:47-48. This also speaks of servants also being beaten with varying numbers of lashes. But If the lashing went on forever then all the servants would get the same number – infinity. Parables are just not meant to be used like this.

A second key point is that it is a jump to imagine that such parables are to teach us about the nature of the afterlife rather than to warn us as Christians to keep a faithful watch. Someone who is ‘cut in pieces’ is surely dead, and cannot ‘gnash teeth’ or ‘be with the hypocrites’ (or get beaten as Luke 12:48 suggests). The foolish virgins are not ‘in torment’ but just shut out from the wedding celebrations – not necessarily even in the dark, because they had been able to go into the town to buy oil and had their lamps with them. The third servant is not sent to the torturers but put in a place of lament for loss of opportunity – the ‘gnashing of teeth’ in Scripture indicates regret, not pain. One has to be very careful because not all the parts of a parable are meant to teach specific doctrine.

So are these just illustrations by Jesus of different kinds of situation in which someone who was unfaithful suffered loss when the bridegroom/master arrived back unexpectedly? Is he intending us just to take the fundamental point of keeping faithful watch, rather than trying to guess exactly what kind of fate awaits those who don’t? Are these maybe parallel to the one in 1 Corinthians 3:15 who was saved as through fire but ‘suffered loss’, and so in some sense may have gnashed teeth of regret? If they are cast out into darkness, is the exclusion permanent and time-without-end? None of these are the main point of the parables, so it would be unwise to be dogmatic. Jesus is not inviting us to speculate about the fate of non-Christians, but as Christians to ‘keep watch’. It would be a poor approach to interpreting Scripture to take parables that are warnings to Christians to stay vigilant (with sometimes paradoxical comments about the possible outcomes causing regret at the judgement) to outweigh the clear indications elsewhere that the final fate of the impenitent is destruction.

Immortality

All this assumes that human beings are not inherently immortal. This particular point seems fairly clear in Scripture. The biblical terms are

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atharsian and *athanasian*. 1 Timothy 6:16 (and see 1:17) says that God alone is inherently immortal. 1 Corinthians 15:53–4 speaks of us ‘putting on immortality/incorruption’ at the resurrection, as implied also in 1 Corinthians 15:42. Romans 2:7 says that some seek it, and if they seek it rightly will receive eternal life. 2 Timothy 1:10 says it is brought by Jesus. Nowhere is it said or implied to be an inherent property of humans. It is a gift of God, like eternal life, to believers. It is not given to the impenitent.

There is more on all this in our book *God’s Path to Victory*.

Second chance?

Humans are not inherently immortal, and ‘it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement.’ (Hebrews 9:27). But could there be some kind of further chance to repent after death? Christians are told to preach repentance *now* (eg Acts 17:30), and we have no mandate to promise any further chance after death. But it can be noted that God gave no prospect of mercy in Jonah 3:4, but both the Ninevites (Jonah 3:9) and the prophet (Jonah 4:2) knew that he was a God who could relent and show mercy (Jonah 3:10). God has not even specifically said that there is no further chance to repent after death, so it would be a bold person who would say that God has ruled it out. Having said this, however, it is difficult to see how Jesus’ words about *destruction* would be consistent with a situation in which the unrepentant continued through endless time with a continual opportunity to repent. If, as John 3:16 says, they are to ‘perish’, or as Matthew 10:28 says to have their *psuchē* destroyed in the eternal fire of *gehenna*, then beyond this point they will not be there to be able to repent. As already noted, then, universalism is not consistent with Jesus’ words, any more than unending suffering.

Conclusion

Hell is real because Jesus taught it, but it is as he taught: a place where, for the finally impenitent, the body and *psyche* are destroyed. In 2000 the UK Evangelical Alliance study *The Nature of Hell* concluded that a significant minority of evangelicals took the view of hell expressed in the present chapter, and it maybe this number is growing. It is the most obvious understanding of the New Testament words on destruction after the final judgement. There are various other verses which are used by so-called ‘traditionalists’ to advocate unending suffering, but on these reference may be made to more compendious works such as E. W. Fudge’s 2011 edition of *The Fire That Consumes*.

17. New Heaven and Earth

The Kingdom of God is real

There is to be a new heaven and earth

Matthew 6: ¹⁰ Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Matthew 4: ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

John 18: ³⁶ Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’

Luke 17: ²⁰ Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’

Matthew 7: ²¹ ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’

Romans 14: ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

A lot more detail on this topic is in Roger Forster’s *The Kingdom of Jesus*, but here is a brief summary of some of the issues.

In one sense God’s Kingdom has always existed and is timeless. In another sense the Kingdom *came* in power with Jesus the King. In another sense, it *will come* at the future time of the coming and continuing presence (*parousia*), when he comes again.

The title ‘Messiah’ (Christ) means ‘anointed one’, and Jesus is both the anointed King and our anointed High Priest. In a sense the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus as King at the time of his baptism, beginning a pouring out of the Holy Spirit from him as a fountainhead to be made accessible for all people in the New Covenant. It is in the Holy Spirit that the Kingdom brings joy and peace and righteousness. The Kingdom is ‘among you’ because of the presence of the King, at one time in his human form and now in his body,

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the church. It is not a 'kingdom' in the sense of a human kingdom, and that was the mistake of the 'Christendom' fostered by Augustine in which there was an oppressive state-enforced religion. There is, of course, a proper role for the state. Christians should be good citizens from conscience, not merely from fear of consequences, in supporting civil governments (even dictatorships like the Roman Empire) which fulfil a God-given function of maintaining law and order (Romans 13:1–8). Christians also *pray* for kings and all who are in authority, that they fulfil this function in ways that enable us (and by 'us' is meant Christians everywhere, not just in our own country) to lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence (1 Timothy 2:2–3). However, when states enforce religion, then usually true Christians have at some point to say 'we must obey God rather than any human authority' (Acts 5:29). The Kingdom of God itself is not that kind of political human kingdom, otherwise Jesus' followers would have fought. He said it was not 'from this world', meaning not set up by warfare and revolution as ultimately are human kingdoms. But though it is divine rather than human in source, it is not 'otherworldly' in the sense of being disconnected from the world. This is because Christians are active *in* the world as salt and light, to seek to bring active love and social justice as part of a whole gospel. This 'gospel of the Kingdom' is described by Jesus in Luke 4:16–20, and it involves several layers. There is the proclamation of God's forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice; there is the anointing of the Spirit that was later extended through Pentecost to the whole church; and there is the release from spiritual, physical and social ills through the Spirit-filled action by Christ and his body on earth.

Christians *are* called to a conflict, but at a spiritual level and not in human force of arms. This is because the King has triumphed over the evil principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15) and is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20). It is there in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12) that we, who form his body on earth, are called to stand in his armour and in prayer to maintain the victory ground – as was touched on in chapter 13.

All this fulfils the general expectations of the Jewish nation for the coming kingdom, though not in ways most of them may have come to expect. Daniel 7 predicted the coming of the Kingdom, and also that it would be given to 'the saints of the Most High' or 'the saints in the high places'. Christians live, as the Sermon on the Mount indicates, as meek, peacemakers, thirsting for righteousness and pure in heart (Matthew 5:2–9). The indications are,

however, that although the saints are reigning and know that theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, they are also expected to suffer persecution (Matthew 5:10–12, Luke 6:22–3, 2 Timothy 2:3, *etc*). One day the suffering will cease and just the reigning will continue. In the meantime the church must reign through Christ Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we can exert the Kingdom of God and reign in present earthly situations. The Kingdom is brought near when, for example, in Jesus' name Christians exert authority over evil spiritual forces (Matthew 12:28) or heal the sick (Luke 10:9), seeing God breakthrough in Kingdom power. So Christians pray that God's Kingdom will come to the earth as in heaven, and we open ourselves as channels through his Spirit to bring Kingdom experiences to the here and now.

Christians also, of course, look forward to the time when God will wind up the present system of things, and to a time when 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

Revelation 21: ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ 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.'

God's Path to Victory analyses in depth the meaning of the term 'eternity' in Scripture. But what is certain is that whoever has faith in Jesus shall not perish but have eternal life. This is a quality of life that starts now and continues into the age to come. We, the church, are the bride of Christ, the heavenly city. So what Christians have to do now is to work towards it.

Ephesians 5: ²⁵ Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

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Whatever your tradition, and even if you do not fully agree with some of the doctrines outlined in this book from Scripture, if you genuinely love and serve Jesus then we should all work together in the power of the Holy Spirit to give Christ what he desires – a bride unblemished. Let Christians all work together to make disciples of all nations, disciples who grow ever more to be like Jesus as we get nearer and nearer to the ultimate wedding feast of Christ and his bride, the church. Christians can all in this life seek to let God express through us his *agape* love (1 Corinthians 13:1–13). But we all also have to recognise that we know now only in part, and look forward together to that time when we will know fully, even as we are fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

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