

Bible Study Theme: The Twelve Great Subjects of Scripture

1. The Bible
2. The Godhead: The Holy Trinity
3. God the Father
4. God the Son
5. God the Holy Spirit
6. Angels
7. Humanity (Man)
8. Salvation (Soteriology)
9. The Christian
10. The Church
11. The Means of Grace
12. Future Things (Eschatology)

A very helpful book on these themes is:

Bruce Milne: *Know the Truth* (IVP) 2nd Edition (1998). Relevant passages are indicated in the notes [KTT]. It is helpful to begin by reading KTT 9 – 24.

A more technical book is:

T C Hammond & D F Wright: *In understanding be men* (IVP). Relevant passages are indicated in the notes [H & W].

In this study we look at the Bible “thematically” to find out what it says about particular subjects.

STUDY 1

The Bible

Four main points

1. Revelation
2. Inspiration
3. Interpretation
4. Authority

1. Revelation

Reading:

Hebrews 1: 1 - 2; Luke 24: 13 - 35
KTT 30 – 38
H & W 25 - 27

2. Inspiration

Reading:

2 Peter 1: 20 - 21; 2 Timothy 3: 14 - 17; Heb 3: 7
KTT 39 – 59
H & W 28 - 34

3. Interpretation

Reading:

2 Timothy 2: 14 - 19; 1 Corinthians 2: 12
KTT 59 – 66
H & W 35 - 38

4. Authority

Reading:

1 Corinthians 15: 1 - 11; Matthew 22: 29 - 31
KTT 25 – 29
H & W 38 - 40

1. Revelation

Christian faith is a matter of trusting God rather than agreeing with a series of propositions (even the demons do that; James 2: 19) - but how do we come even to a position of trusting God? On the one hand Christians believe that God is transcendent (that is beyond the created universe) or hidden, but on the other hand we believe that he can be known, not by our piercing into his realm (cf. The Tower of Babel; Genesis 11) but by his revealing something of himself and his nature to us. Our beliefs about God are therefore dependent upon divine self-revelation.

Some people want to say that God has revealed himself through creation and the world around us (and it would be hard to say that this is not so - e.g. Isaiah 40). Hebrews 1: 1 - 2 points out that God has spoken in many ways, notably through the prophets but that God's supreme revelation comes through his Son. If God has revealed himself in Jesus, then Scripture claims to be the record of that revelation and a record of other events in which God was thought to be especially active (not least the History of Israel).

Revelation really consists in an event and a comment upon it. If there is no comment, no interpretation, what meaning can be drawn from the event? If there is no event then it is difficult to see how the comment alone is revelation. The Biblical account of the coming of Jesus provides both the historical record and interpretation.

The prophets claimed to be spokesmen for God while in places too numerous to mention the Bible characters and writers claim to have God's word on a particular matter. This has given rise to the traditional view that the Bible is, in a special way, 'the Word of God' and that the study of the Bible is worthwhile for it is God's chosen way to reveal himself to people of all generations and is the record of God's supreme self-disclosure in Jesus.

2. Inspiration

Words are indispensable for communication. Even sign language is interpreted in terms of words for what the signs mean. The Bible is punctuated by 'The word of the Lord came to me', 'This is what the Lord says' or claims that the words spoken or written are under the power or influence of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine that the Bible is the 'Word of God' is sometimes expressed in the word 'inspired' though 2 Timothy 3: 16 would be better translated God-breathed (expired). It is only fair to say that in recent times this has been a notoriously controversial area.

The traditional theory, simply expressed, is that the Holy Spirit enabled the Biblical writers to find adequate words to express the divine revelation without reducing the Biblical writers to secretaries taking dictation. The description of this as 'verbal inspiration' is often misunderstood but the alternative term 'plenary' (meaning full) inspiration does not seem any more helpful. 2 Peter 1: 21 'Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' shows that the Scriptures themselves are against a theory of mechanical dictation. The Spirit uses the human personality and variety of the writers in a mysterious way (not unlike the doctrine of the Incarnation).

Two further problems need mentioning. The first is that if the Scriptures are inspired what was the moment of inspiration? This must be faced for clearly some of the books are collections of writings. But the broad answer is that the finished form is the 'Word of God' even if the exact point of inspiration is unknown. (Matters of conception and birth are like that.) This view has to concede that the text may contain corruptions but appeal is seldom made to this. The second point concerns what books should be included in the collection. The Jews accepted the Old Testament books as being the Word of God. The New Testament books became accepted by their usage and in time an authorized list (canon) was drawn up.

3. Interpretation

Biblical interpretation is most easily understood around three questions, namely:

What does the Bible say?

What does the Bible mean?

What does the Bible mean to me?

It is very important not to skip question two.

The Christian looks to the aid of the Holy Spirit for understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures. There is a sense in which the Scriptures remain black print on a white page unless the Holy Spirit works for, at the end of the day, we are grappling with what the divine revelation means and there is no doubt that God himself is the one most suited to help us.

Much is presently made of the unsuitability of the expression 'The Bible says...' but it need not be wrong in itself (especially if it is merely a convenient way of expressing what the Bible means to me/us). However, there are a number of things that the Bible says which cannot be lifted out of their context and cultural background without doing violence to them. The issue of the purpose of the writer and what the passage meant to the original readers is very important. Then it is important to relate the passage in hand to other relevant passages, to compare and hopefully illuminate the meaning. It would also be clearly wrong to allow one isolated text (proof-text) to influence one's conclusions against an overwhelming trend within the Bible.

There are times when the Old Testament provides essential background to the New Testament and there are times when the New Testament completes the Old (e.g. in the matter of blood-sacrifice). But it is best to think of the Scriptures as a unity rather than look for tensions between the two testaments. As a genuine interpreter it is necessary to take the strain of having one foot in the twenty-first century world and one foot in the world of the Bible.

4. Authority

All Christians are agreed that God has spoken in Christ and that some reliable record of Christ's coming is recorded in the Bible. For over 2000 years the Scriptures have a proven track record. When there have been additions these have often been accompanied by tragic consequences. The traditional Protestant belief has been that nothing can be added to the Scriptures and that nothing outside of the Scriptures should be imposed as an essential Christian belief or practice. This view holds that if there is prophecy today it must be measured against the Scriptural canon. The Bible is studied as the 'Word of God' in the belief that by the help of the Holy Spirit he still speaks through it.

Where Christians disagree is over the authority of the Bible. A general rule is that the higher view of inspiration goes with a higher view of Biblical authority, though all of this is inevitably subject to Biblical interpretation.

The four main sources of authority (there are more) may be categorised as Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience and probably each is present in divergent views to some extent. Classical Protestantism has looked only to the Scriptures as the source of authority. Catholicism has seen the Scriptures as part of the tradition of the Church, which is itself the authority. Liberalism has tended to look to reason as the test, while some Pentecostals and Charismatics have given special authority to Christian experience.

Traditional Methodist thinking (i.e. that of Wesley) has given supreme authority to the Bible but looked to tradition (Christian antiquity), reason and experience as useful helps to interpreting the Bible. Tradition, reason and experience are all subject to the central authority of the Bible but are not excluded as helps to the right interpretation of the divine revelation recorded in Scripture.

STUDY 2

The Godhead: The Holy Trinity

Four main points

1. Existence
2. Metaphysical Attributes
3. Moral Attributes
4. Trinity

1. Existence

Reading:

Romans 1: 18 - 25, Acts 17: 22 - 30
KTT 67 - 74
H & W 41 - 42

2. Metaphysical Attributes

Reading:

Psalm 139: 7 - 10; 1 Tim. 1: 17; Col. 1: 17
KTT 80 - 85
H & W 43 - 47 (50 - 51)

3. Moral Attributes

Reading:

Rev. 4: 8; 2 Peter 3: 9 - 15; 1 Jn. 4: 7 - 10
KTT 85 - 90
H & W 47 - 50

4. Trinity

Reading:

Deut. 6: 4; Jn. 1: 1; Matt. 28: 19; Eph. 1: 3 - 14
KTT 75 - 80
H & W 51 - 57

1. Existence

There are many philosophical arguments that set out to prove the existence of God. Generally the Bible simply assumes the existence of God. The very nature of God means that if we are to know God at all it is on the basis of his self-revelation. The Bible claims that God has revealed himself to us in ways that we can understand and that we can understand because we are made in the divine image (Gen. 1: 27).

It has been said, ‘unbelief never has enough proof’. The Psalmist writes, ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God” ’ (53: 1). However, this foolishness is not related to academic or intellectual capability but rather is a moral and spiritual condition that is the opposite to the Biblical notion of ‘Wisdom’.

There are places within the Scriptures where evidence for the existence of God is claimed. This evidence may be divided into two categories, that which comes from natural and that which comes from supernatural sources. There is enough evidence in the ‘natural world’, in creation, to show the existence of God. It is because of human sin and wickedness that this is not recognised (Rom. 1: 18 - 25). Some notion of God survives throughout the world (Acts 17: 24 - 28) but this needs to be enlightened by God’s supernatural self-revelation.

Traditional Christian thought has seen the major sources of God’s self-revelation as being through the word of the inspired Biblical writers and supremely in the ‘Word made flesh’ (i.e. Jesus Christ). The Bible bears witness to Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation and claims to be a faithful record of his life, teachings, claims, death, resurrection and ascension and his promises for the future. It is because of this record of self-revelation that our thoughts started with the Bible and moved on to what we could know about God.

2. Metaphysical Attributes

What we know about God depends on what he reveals to us, including his name. Metaphysical attributes are characteristics that are absolutely distinctive to God, as opposed to those that are, in some measure, reflected in humankind. No list of the divine attributes can ever be exhaustive, for God is infinite, that is limitless, without bounds of either time 'eternal' (1 Tim. 1: 17) or space 'omnipresent' (Ps. 139: 7 - 10).

God is spirit (Jn. 4: 24). He is a non-material being. This is the very root of the prohibition of making images of God or idols. God is in no way dependent on that which he has created (Acts 17: 25). He stands outside of his creation and yet is actively engaged in every part of it (Col. 1: 17). This is sometimes referred to as God's transcendence (that God stands outside of his creation) and immanence (he is close at hand at every point). The idea that God is everywhere is sometimes expressed as his omnipresence. The notion that God is more present in one place rather than another has to be disregarded. It is not so much that he is more present in a particular place or circumstances but that he is more revealed or known.

There is nothing that God does not know. His knowledge is absolute (omniscience) (Rom. 11: 23). There is nothing that God cannot do providing, of course, that it is consistent with his own nature and sovereignty (omnipotence) (Jer. 32: 17). God is unchanging in his character, nature, purposes and promises. To say that he never changes does not mean that he is static, but rather that he is consistent in his ways and works.

In all of this God is represented personally, as a being with mind, will and emotions. We must beware of limiting God by the use of anthropomorphic (man-shaped) language but applying human terms to God helps to reinforce his personal nature. He is the source of the 'life-breath', which characterises living beings.

3. Moral Attributes

The adjective most often used to describe God in the Bible is 'holy' (Rev. 4: 18). Holy, so often construed in a negative way in the present day, means God's exaltation in majesty above the creation, his perfection and his purity. He is separate from all that is 'fallen' through sin. It is because of his holiness that God hates all sin. God's controlled (it is not temper) and permanent (it is not a mood) opposition to sin is known as his wrath (Romans 1: 18; 2: 5).

God's love is so difficult adequately to express that the New Testament writers used a rare word 'agape' (*a-ga-pay*) for divine love. It has the essential quality of giving-love. It is argued that for God to be love there must be a lover and a beloved at the very heart of his nature (1 Jn. 4: 7 - 10). Some see this as a pointer to the Trinity.

Three closely related aspects of God's nature are his justice, his mercy and his grace. God is righteous and he acts justly (Ps. 36: 6). Justice means getting what you deserve. Mercy means the remission of punishment and God's disposition to relieve the misery caused by sin (Ps. 103: 5; Titus 3: 5). In short, mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is unmerited favour from God, which is shown by his forgiveness of sin (Eph. 1: 6). In short, it is getting something good that you do not deserve.

The disposition of God is to deal graciously and benevolently with all his creatures. He is good (Ps. 145: 8 - 9). He is patient (2 Pet. 3: 9 - 15). He is wise (Col. 2: 2 - 3). His character, his words and his actions are entirely dependable. He is truthful (Num. 23: 19). The utter reliability of God's character, commands and promises, and his steadfast, determined loyalty may be summed up in his faithfulness (Ps. 89: 1 - 2, 8). But God is not the sum of his individual attributes. They are all exercised in harmony because he is God.

4. Trinity

Every statement of Christian Doctrine is, in a way, an attempt to make orderly sense of the various strands of teaching in the Bible. It is right to say that the word 'Trinity' cannot be found in the Bible but the doctrine of the 'Trinity' makes sense of the Scriptural teaching.

The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity can be summarised in three statements. There is one God and only one God; this one God exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; these three persons are completely equal, each fully possessing the divine nature or essence.

The teaching of the Old Testament is unequivocal. There is but one God (Deut. 6: 4). The Israelites were absolutely committed to belief in one God. The idols of the heathen were not gods in any real sense.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that it was against this background that the early Christians came to believe that Jesus shared the nature of God. John's Gospel calls Jesus God (1: 1; 20: 28). The early Christians not only knew Jesus as the Son of God, but also worshipped him and applied to him titles used of God in the Old Testament.

The Holy Spirit was also regarded as divine and described in personal terms. The early Christians name God the Father, Jesus Christ his only Son and the Holy Spirit alongside each other in a way that implies their equality. The idea of Trinity is the solution to the problem of one God in three persons.

Perhaps the most notable text is Matthew 28: 19. Baptism was the outward sign of initiation into the Christian community. Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, says that baptism is in the name (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

STUDY 3

God the Father

Four main points

1. Creation
2. Covenant
3. Adoption
4. Father of Jesus Christ

1. Creation

Reading:

Isa. 66: 1, 2; Col. 1: 17; Heb. 11: 3; Rev. 4: 11
KTT 90 – 98 (101 – 111)
H & W 57 - 65

2. Covenant

Reading:

Gen. 9: 8 - 17; 17: 1 - 8; Ex. 24; 2 Sam. 7;
Jer. 31: 31 - 34; Matt. 26: 26 - 29; 1 Cor. 5: 7

3. Adoption

Reading:

Rom. 8: 14 – 17 (or 1 – 17); Gal. 4: 4 - 6; 1 Pet. 2: 9 – 10; Gal. 3: 1 - 4: 7

4. Father of Jesus Christ

Reading:

John 1: 1 - 18; 8: 56 - 58; 17: 5, 24; 20: 17
Luke 11: 1 - 3; Rev. 22: 13

1. Creation

It is right and proper that we think primarily of God the Father when we consider creation but that need not mean that we exclude the role of the Son and the Spirit. God the Father is the ultimate author of creation. His Son is the agent through whom the world was created and for whom it exists (1 Cor. 8: 6). The Spirit (wind, breath) is also associated with creation.

Creation came into being by God's supernatural power. The dignified record of the Genesis days stands in between the fantastic ancient mythological accounts and modern scientific cosmology. The Biblical creation story is different from both. It uses timeless language, which can communicate to every culture and era in a way that other forms could not.

The central point is that God created (Rev. 4: 11). He himself is uncreated. He created from nothing (*ex nihilo*; Heb. 11: 3). Everything else is part of creation but God is distinct from it. The view that God and the universe are indivisible is called 'pantheism'. Time and the creation began to exist together.

Since creation God has not left it to its own devices - like an absentee landlord. God is self-existent. He does not need the universe or humankind. The universe is not self-existent. The universe and the world could not exist without the maintaining presence of God. He preserves us. God is intimately involved in what he has created (Col. 1: 17).

The exact relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom is difficult to define. God's ultimate power means that all things are working toward his final purpose. It is a source of wonder that God should be concerned with such a tiny world and even smaller creatures in his vast universe. Yet he has created all of us. He is the Father of his creation (Mal. 2: 10).

2. Covenant

God is Father to creation but only in a general sense. Though the universe is under his fatherly care that care is not as it could be because of the broken relationship between humankind and God caused by human sin. God desires to enter into a new relationship with a people of his own - to whom he can be Father in the fullest sense.

A key theme in Scripture is therefore that of covenant. Ancient Near Eastern treaties often took a covenant form. It was not so much a contract between equals for goods and services as a relationship between a great king and his vassals. The great king was often called the 'father' and the vassals his 'sons'. The technical term often used in the Old Testament means literally 'to cut a covenant'. Covenantal rites often included sacrifice and a covenant meal (See Exodus 24). The relationship was usually one of promises and obligations. Early covenants in the Bible are between God and Noah. Other important covenants are with Abraham (the patriarchal covenant), Moses (the Sinai covenant) and David (the Davidic covenant). In a sense these covenants did not replace one another but existed side by side. It is possible that the Israelites gathered at a New Year's Festival to renew the covenant (cf. our Covenant Service).

In the New Testament the theme of covenant is most closely connected with the Lord's Supper. In the institution of the Holy Communion Jesus refers to his body as the bread and his blood as the wine. The reference to Jesus as the Passover (Paschal) Lamb is clear. The killing of Jesus as the Paschal Lamb would take place at Calvary. Paul sees Christ's crucifixion as taking on himself the curses of the law in order to redeem mankind. (Gal. 3: 13) The curse of the Sinaitic covenant is removed and the promise of the Davidic covenant is anticipated for, with the New Testament, a fresh expectation is given of the coming (Parousia) of the Messiah for the people who rightly call God 'Father'.

3. Adoption

There are two ways to count someone as Father - the first is to be born of that Father, the second is to be adopted by that Father and the Bible uses both ideas to express the Christian's relationship to God.

The Bible only rarely speaks of God as the Father of humankind and then only in a general way as creator and preserver. It is not a biblical view to speak of God as the Father of all in a special sense. The truth of the matter is that by nature we are not members of God's family and have no rights within it. The initiative is with the Father. We cannot find our way into his family, any more than we can choose our parents before we are born. It all depends upon whether the Father is willing to adopt us and count us as his children.

Adoption of a 'sinner' (an ordinary fallen human being) is impossible for God, for membership of his family is marked by particular characteristics to which sin is alien and incompatible. Adoption is made possible because Christ has redeemed the Christian from sin and removed the blemishes that would otherwise make a person unfit to be called a child of God.

God stands in the relationship of Father only to those who trust in him. His fatherly care is for them. They for their part must show the family qualities by living lives of holiness and love.

' "When we put our trust in Christ, we now become by adoption what Christ is by nature" (Rom. 8: 17). Paul puts this by saying that we receive the Spirit of God (Rom. 8: 14), just as Jesus himself possessed the Spirit and was addressed by God as his Son (Lk. 3: 22). The possession of the Spirit is proof of our sonship. It is because we possess the Spirit that we are able to confess Jesus as our Lord (1 Cor. 12: 3) and to address God as our Father (Rom. 8: 15)" ' (Marshall).

4. Father of Jesus Christ

When Jesus wanted to speak of God he spoke of him as 'Father'. We must not confuse the teaching of Jesus about the Fatherhood of God. There is the adoptive fatherhood of God in which believers are sons of God through faith (Gal. 3: 26) but Jesus never muddled his relationship with God his Eternal Father with the privilege afforded to the disciples, adopted children, of having God as their Father.

God is the Father of Jesus Christ by eternal generation. He did not become the Father of Jesus at his conception or at his birth, though clearly there is a sense in which God's Eternal Fatherhood is revealed in this temporal event.

The Father-Son relationship that we see between the Eternal Father and the Eternal Son is different from the relationship that the disciples and Christians have with God. Jesus indicated these two relationships in the resurrection message through Mary by saying 'My Father and your Father' (John 20: 17). The two are linked together, for one is the very ground of the other. The Sonship of Jesus, though on a unique level, forms the very basis of the Christian's sonship.

Two topical (controversial!) issues arise from this. Firstly, though Mary, the Mother of Jesus is 'blessed among women' her motherhood is different from God's fatherhood. She was Mother to Jesus in his earthly life (his state of humiliation) but cannot be the 'Mother of God' in an eternal sense (see John 19: 26 - 27). Secondly, though we want to use inclusive language, as often as is sensible, we must not weaken the Biblical teaching. The eternal relationship in the Godhead is revealed as Father-Son. Yet in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (all are blessed with the promises of God as 'seed' of Abraham), slave nor free (God has given freedom to all who are in Christ), male nor female (all are given the blessings associated with sonship) in him (Gal 3: 28).

STUDY 4. God the Son

Four main points

1. Deity and Humanity
2. Humiliation
3. Exaltation and Return
4. Work

1. Deity and Humanity

Reading:

John 1: 1 - 18; 8: 56 - 59; 17: 4, 5; Matt. 26: 63 - 65
KTT 161 – 189
H & W 95 - 97; 100 - 103

2. Humiliation

Reading:

Phil. 2: 5 - 11; Heb. 2: 9 - 18; 4: 15; Mk. 10: 45; Tit. 2: 11
H & W 97 - 99; 103 - 107

3. Exaltation and Return

Reading:

Luke 24: 36 - 43; Acts 2: 32 - 36; 1: 9 - 11; Eph. 1: 20
H & W 107 - 112

4. Work

Reading:

Rom. 5: 9, 18, 19; Heb. 2: 11 - 18; 4: 14; 10: 5 - 10
H & W 105; 112 – 115

1. Deity and Humanity

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus was the name given to the baby of Bethlehem. Christ (meaning 'Messiah'; 'anointed one') is more accurately a title rather than a personal name. The Second Person of the Trinity had an existence before Bethlehem. This is the significance of the expression pre-existence of the Eternal Word or the Eternal Son. The conception of Jesus Christ was supernatural but his birth was natural enough. Jesus had a human mother, grew up like other boys of his time, and experienced the full range of human emotions and feelings - sorrow, anger, compassion; hunger, thirst, weariness.

Much modern thought accepts Jesus as a great moral teacher and some of the parables (e.g. Good Samaritan) are widely admired. However, it is inconsistent to say that Jesus was only a great moral teacher. His character (his sinlessness and purity); his claims (to be the source of truth and justice and in a unique relationship with God his Father); and his conduct (performing miracles, pronouncing forgiveness and accepting worship) make Jesus either divine or anything but a teacher of morality (because if he was not divine so many of things he said and did were blasphemous, false and misleading).

The relationship between the divine metaphysical attributes and human nature is difficult. There is a sense in which Jesus needed to empty himself of the privileges and glory of divinity without losing the essence of divine nature. Orthodox belief was refined at the early Christian Councils culminating with the statement of the Council of Chalcedon (451), which countered various heresies (e.g. Docetic: Jesus only seemed human; Arian: Jesus subordinate to the Father, not co-eternal; Apollinarian: divine spirit, human soul and body; Nestorian: two natures held apart - double personality; Monophysite: one nature, either a hybrid or playing down the human dimension).

2. Humiliation

The state of Christ's humiliation includes his incarnation, life, sufferings, death and descent to Hades. The incarnation is the doctrine, which asserts that God took humanity upon himself, and the form of human flesh (John 1: 14). The teaching that Jesus was God clothed or veiled in human flesh does not, as sometimes mistakenly assumed, imply docetism. Jesus was made in the likeness of sinful mankind (Rom. 8: 3), that is he was like Adam, as regard to his human nature, fully human and yet without sin.

Much of the debate in the New Testament centres on the person of Jesus and whether he was the promised Messiah. There is a latent contrast in the Old Testament between an understanding of the Messiah as a suffering servant and as a glorious king, so much so that some thought that perhaps there would be two Messiahs.

Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, to fulfil prophecy, to reveal God in both his suffering and his glorification. The coming of God in flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ, was for the purpose of redemption (Mark 10: 45; Titus 2: 11). Jesus as the "second man", "the second Adam", "the proper man" came in order that he might overcome temptation, be obedient to death, rise in triumph and so pioneer the way of salvation for all who would trust in and follow him. Jesus became the covenant head of a new race of redeemed people (Heb. 2: 14 - 18).

We must not limit the sufferings of Jesus to the last days of his life. His whole life was on the human plane, which is oppressed by suffering. If Jesus has not been tempted and suffered in the fullest sense, if he had been born fully human but preserved in a divinely provided cotton-wool, his humanity would have been hollow. The death of Jesus was for the purpose of being an atoning-sacrifice for sin. His burial and descent to the abode of the dead enabled genuine victory over these in resurrection.

3. Exaltation and Return

The exaltation of Jesus Christ includes his resurrection, ascension and present heavenly session from which he has promised to come again, not in humility but in glory. Authentic, apostolic proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ centres on the reality of his resurrection.

The resurrection is the vindication of one who was obedient to death. It has a basis in History. The change brought about in the disciples, the failure to produce the body even in the face of the claims to resurrection, the variety of appearances and the survival and growth of the infant Church despite the most severe persecution, all point to something far more considerable than what might be termed “a resurrection myth”.

Resurrection is more than the survival of the soul, or the persistence of personality. There were things about the spiritual, immortal, imperishable body of Jesus that were different from the physical body but there were things that were the same. He ate with the disciples who could recognise him, touch him and so on. The appearing and disappearing of Jesus before his ascension are perhaps due to the relationship between his immanence and transcendence.

Two great and comforting truths, which are immediately apparent from the resurrection, are God’s justice and the hope that death is not the final word. The ascension is necessary to show how the risen Christ left the earth. No other way would seem adequate to deal with the truth that needs to be expressed.

The pattern of death, resurrection and exaltation, pioneered by Jesus is the way in which Christians are now called to follow. With the ascension of Christ we have the promise that he is preparing a place for us. In him we have the assurance of a place in heaven, the eternal Kingdom of God.

4. Work

The work of Christ is normally divided into three - Prophet, Priest and King. The Old Testament predicted the coming of Christ as a prophet. This is a claim that Jesus takes up. He claims to bring a message from God, his Father, speaks with great authority and acts in a prophetic way. Indeed, he is often recognised by the people as a prophet.

The Old Testament also predicted and prefigured the priesthood of the coming Redeemer. The simplest distinction between prophet and priest is to say that a prophet represents God to the people and a priest represents the people to God. A priest is taken from among people to be their representative, to approach God and to speak and act on behalf of the people. The New Testament speaks very clearly about the priestly work of Jesus Christ, who brought himself as a sacrifice for sin. The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed the perfect and complete sacrifice of Christ (the Lamb of God - John 1: 29; the Passover 1 Cor. 5: 7). Jesus also makes intercession for the people. He pleads the cause of his people as their advocate. On the ground of his self-sacrifice, Jesus claims spiritual blessings for his people and defends them against the onslaught of evil. Jesus secures forgiveness from every charge brought against the believer. This heavenly session is the culmination of Christ's work as Redeemer.

The kingship of Christ is simply his royal rule over his people. It is a spiritual realm established in the hearts and lives of believers rather than spatial realm. This Kingdom is in one sense present already as a reality in the hearts and lives of Christian people, but in another sense it is a future hope that will be realised when Christ returns in glory.

The study of other work, names and titles of Jesus Christ (e.g. as Shepherd, Apostle, Captain) will assist a fuller understanding of the scope of his grace.

STUDY 5 God the Holy Spirit

Four main points

1. Deity and Personality
2. General Work
3. Saving Work
4. Spiritual Work

1. Deity and Personality

Reading:

Gen. 1: 1, 2; John 14: 23 - 27; 15: 26; Acts 5: 3; Eph. 4: 30
KTT 221 – 226
H & W 128 - 133

2. General Work

Reading:

Psalm 104: 29, 30; John 6: 44; 16: 5 - 18
H & W 133 - 135

3. Saving Work

Reading:

Rom. 3: 20 - 28; Rom. 8: 1 - 17; Eph. 4: 22 - 24
KTT 215 – 220
H & W 136 - 152

4. Spiritual Work

Reading:

1 Cor. 12: 1 - 11; Gal. 5: 16 - 26
Eph. 1: 3
KTT 253 - 255

1. Deity and Personality

Christian teaching affirms that the Holy Spirit is as much a divine 'person' (whatever the limitations of that word may be) as the Eternal Father and the Eternal Son. Throughout Scripture the words and works of the Holy Spirit are equated with the words and works of God. In the New Testament the words of the LORD are often said to be those of the Spirit. The works of God are often accomplished through the agency of the Holy Spirit. From the outset of creation the work of the Spirit is seen.

The Holy Spirit is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son. The baptismal formula given by Jesus to the apostles embraces each person of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Many symbols are used to represent the work of the Holy Spirit, such as wind, water, fire, oil and the dove. The danger is to limit the Holy Spirit to an impersonal force, albeit a force for God and for good. Some of the symbols used for the Holy Spirit in Scripture carry a neuter gender and pronoun 'it'. There is also a modern trend to call God 'she' at every possible opportunity and the Holy Spirit is of course far more vulnerable to this treatment than the Father or the Son. This idea, however well intentioned, can easily lead to serious error and should therefore be avoided. It is generally safer to use masculine pronouns for God in the fullness of his Trinitarian being to avoid confusion and to maintain a clear understanding of the important Biblical imagery. That need not mean that we exclude from our understanding of God characteristics that we in our culture associate more readily with the female gender.

There used to be a time when the Holy Spirit was the neglected person of the Trinity. Now it is perhaps the case that the balance has swung too far the other way. It is important not to lose sight of the unity of the 'One God' as we try to appreciate the fullness of the being of the Triune Godhead.

2. General Work

The general work of the Holy Spirit in bringing creation into being is recorded in Genesis. But Scripture also records that the Spirit has a role in sustaining the living world (Psalm 104: 29, 30).

It is the Holy Spirit who manifests Christ to the Church and to individuals. A vital work of the Holy Spirit is to bring glory to the Eternal Son.

The Holy Spirit is said to have inspired the Holy Scriptures. This is an interesting point because both the Father and the Son speak through the Scriptures. It is a matter of the Holy Spirit being the agent or instrument through which God speaks. The work of the Holy Spirit also extends to his interpretation of the Scriptures. As a great composer of music would be the greatest interpreter of it, while sticking to the printed score, so the Holy Spirit is Scripture's great interpreter, illuminating the Word of God to the reader or listener, without departing from that Word.

A great tension exists in our understanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freewill. Though this is often considered in the context of responding to the saving work of God in Christ, it does of course apply to every part of human life. There is no such thing as absolute freedom for each individual is constrained by his or her own nature.

God has exercised his sovereign rule in such a way as to give individuals freedom of choice. That choice, exercised by Adam, resulted in the fall and our consequent bias to sin. There is a sense in which we are unable to choose what is right. Yet God has not abandoned the world and continues through the Holy Spirit to work in it in a general way, restraining evil and promoting good. This is called prevenient grace.

3. Saving Work

Salvation is, from beginning to end, the work of God. Just as the Holy Spirit had a vital role in creation so the Spirit has a vital role in salvation. Firstly, the Spirit mediates God's prevenient grace. The Spirit also convicts of sin, illuminates truth, reveals Christ, lives in believers, inspires prayer and prepares the believer for heaven.

The two major steps in salvation may be called justification and sanctification, though it is possible to add a third step, glorification. The Holy Spirit is involved in each of these steps. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts human beings of sin, and shows the righteousness of Jesus. The believer receives the Spirit at conversion. It is the Spirit who makes the person, who has been 'dead to God', come alive to God. It is the Spirit who bears witness to the believer inwardly and gives an assurance of salvation.

Justification is clearly related to justice. It is judicial language. Sanctification is a further step. The Christian should be separate from sin and open to God, living in obedience to the will of God. The Christian is called on to full salvation that is not only being accounted as righteous but also becoming more and more Christ-like. At salvation the righteousness of Christ is imputed (counted as ours) but it has been a particular Methodist emphasis that the righteousness of Christ can be imparted (becoming ours). This is the doctrine of scriptural holiness, entire sanctification or what is sometimes called perfect love.

The teaching on this is now much neglected, even within Methodism, and consequently is often misunderstood. Wesley taught that, though there was no absolute perfection on earth, it was at least possible that Christians are saved now from all sin and wrong-doing and that they are perfect in the sense that they do not commit sin and are freed from evil thoughts and emotions.

4. Spiritual Work

Charismatic and Pentecostal thinking has emphasised the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian worship, mission and experience. To stress only this work or to exclude it will lead to an unbalanced understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

The expression 'Baptism in the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12: 13) is undoubtedly Scriptural but what does it mean? It is often associated with, though clearly different from, water-baptism. This problem is compounded by the fact that some people have labelled a particular experience 'baptism in the Spirit'. To discuss the label is not to belittle the experience. From the Scriptural context it seems as if the 'baptism in the Spirit' most accurately describes the reception of the Holy Spirit at conversion. However, that is not to say that there is not an experience of the 'filling of the Holy Spirit' and other spiritual experiences. 'The sealing of the Holy Spirit' implies ownership. This is not an expression that is much in fashion. Instead most discussion centres on the gifts and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The fruit (singular) of the Spirit has many characteristics. These are in themselves Christ-like qualities. There is no option to choose one characteristic and neglect the others. In contrast, the gifts (plural) are given by God, as and when he sees fit and to whom he sees fit. Much discussion has centred on the issue as to whether all the gifts that were given in New Testament times are still given today. Others have wondered whether the list given was ever intended to be exhaustive. It is clear that some people have natural gifts that can be used in the service of God. God may enhance a natural gift or he may give a new one. Gifts should exalt Christ, involve all, unite all, lay foundations, build up, and promote mission. The Holy Spirit equips God's servants to serve.

STUDY 6 Angels

Four main points

1. Holy Angels
2. Satan
3. Demons
4. Spiritual Warfare

1. Holy Angels

Reading:

Heb 1: 14; Ps. 148: 2 - 5; Col. 1: 16; Mt. 22: 30
Isa. 6: 1 - 8; Dan. 9: 20, 21; Lk. 1: 19; Jude 8 - 10; Rev. 12: 7
KTT 98 - 101
H & W 61 - 62

2. Satan

Reading:

Isaiah: 14: 3,4, 12 - 15; Ezekiel 28: 11 - 19
Matthew 13: 19

3. Demons

Reading:

Matthew 4: 23 - 24
2 Peter 2: 4; Jude 6

4. Spiritual Warfare

Reading:

Eph. 6: 10 - 18; Col. 2: 13 - 15
1 Peter 5: 8 - 9; James 4: 7

1. Holy Angels

Religions generally acknowledge the existence of a spiritual world but the existence of spiritual beings is difficult to prove and belief in them, along with everything that cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny, has been doubted for centuries. In the Bible angels appear at a number of major events. The Greek word behind 'angel' can also be translated 'messenger' but the context is usually sufficient to guide in translation. The Bible speaks of the creation of the host of heaven but this could mean the stars. Some passages clearly speak of the creation of angels (Ps. 148: 2, 5; Col. 1: 16). Though angels are not mentioned in the seven days of creation in Genesis it may well be appropriate to include them with the 'heavens' of day one.

Angels have no flesh and bone (Lk. 24: 39), do not marry (Matt. 22: 30), and are invisible (Col. 1: 16). Angels sometimes appear in bodily form but it is hard to say whether these ethereal bodies are real or apparent. They are finite and limited and cannot be in more than one place at one time. Angels are personal beings and not ghosts. They are powerful and ready to do what God commands. They are immortal in the sense that they are not subject to death. The 'angel of the LORD' is sometimes given such authority by God as to make distinction between the angel and God himself difficult.

The number of angels is represented in Scripture as so vast as to be uncountable. Their full number was created in the beginning. Cherubim and Seraphim are classes of angels but although there could be other groups (powers, authorities and so on) nothing definite can be said. Two angels are named. Gabriel is given the task of special messenger. Michael is a valiant warrior for God and is the only being in Scripture designated 'archangel'.

Angels praise God and serve God. They protect little ones (Matt. 18: 10) and seem to be in the Church (Rev. 2: 1) but the belief of some in 'guardian angels' is rather stretching the point.

2. Satan

Later Rabbinic thought speculated about the number of the archangels and has variously come up with the number 4, 6, or 7. Some Christian thought has identified Satan as a fallen archangel, Lucifer, by making reference to Isaiah 14: 12, which in fairness seems to refer more to the fallen King of Babylon than to Satan. Consequently there is a great deal of muddle around the person of Satan, with ideas coming from various sources (Also Ezk. 28).

In the New Testament the enemy of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ, is variously called 'the enemy', 'the evil one', 'the prince of this world', 'the adversary', 'the Devil' (37 times), 'Satan' (36 times), 'Beelzebul' (7 times). This is hardly marginal to the content of Scripture though it is fashionable either to disregard supernatural evil personalities as an outdated myth or to become obsessed with them.

Those who see angels and demons around every corner do not help the cause of the traditional view of the spiritual world. However, there are serious studies about spiritual beings and their influence in the world that merit consideration. The Bible gives no description of the appearance of Satan or of the fallen angels. Red body, horns, tail and trident are not Biblical images. 'Holy angels' are not clearly described either and we should sit loosely to the image that is common.

The weight of the Scriptural evidence is that Satan is a fallen angel who fell from his high position because of pride and is a leader of lesser, fallen angels whose purpose is to separate human beings from God and distract them from worshipping him. The name Satan means 'adversary'. He is a liar, a deceiver and an accuser of the people of God. His work is accomplished under many deceptive guises. He has great power but is not omnipotent. He wields great influence but is nevertheless restricted and he is destined to be cast into the bottomless pit (Rev. 20: 10).

3. Demons

In the Gospel stories we read not only of Jesus overcoming the temptations of Satan but of his having authority over evil spirits and performing exorcisms. The evil spirits that Jesus cast out were demons. It is often said that demon-possession was a primitive way of referring to those illnesses of which we now have a more sophisticated understanding but the Gospel accounts make a clear distinction (see list in Matt. 4: 24). The manner in which Jesus dealt with different circumstances is also shown. Sickness was dealt with by laying on of hands or anointing but demon-possession was dealt with by commanding the demon to go.

Demons are fallen angels. When God saw all that he had created he saw that it was very good. The spiritual beings must also have been very good. Yet there are now evil spiritual beings, which implies that some angels have fallen from their former state (2 Pet. 2: 4; Jude 6). The special sin of these angels has not been revealed but has generally thought to be that they exalted themselves against God and were dragged down by Satan in his fall.

Beelzebul (word related to Baal?) (presumably Satan) is called a 'prince of demons' but there are other places where agents of the Devil are possibly named 'Belial' (angel of darkness) and the Anti-Christ. Like the 'Holy Angels' the evil, fallen angels have power but their use of it is destructive. While the Holy Angels eternally praise God, fight his battles, and serve him faithfully as angels of the light, the demons are, as powers of darkness, bent on cursing God, battling against him and Christ his anointed one, and destroying his work. 'Demons are in constant revolt against God, seek to blind and mislead even the elect, and encourage sinners in their evil. But they are lost and hopeless spirits. They are even now chained to hell and pits of darkness, and though not yet limited to one place, yet, as Calvin says, drag their chains with them wherever they go' (Berkhof).

4. Spiritual Warfare

The notion of spiritual warfare is ridiculed both inside and outside of the Church. The Bible views the whole matter very seriously and the Apostle Paul seems to be saying that it is not just a matter of a war happening in the spiritual realm but that Christians are engaged in that war (Eph. 6: 12).

The view that evil is just the absence of good seems inadequate not only in our understanding of History but also in our interpretation of current affairs. The human capacity for evil does seem to be beyond our imagination. Belief in the evil supernatural is at least a possible explanation of the monstrous evil that has been afflicting the world even to the present day.

There is a very definite fight for good against evil that is a wrestling or struggle with flesh and blood. In fact our own bodily desires are often in conflict with what we know to be good, honourable and right. But that is not the entire extent of it - there is a combat also with the spiritual realm that is real if not flesh and blood.

Against the deceitful wiles and destructive force of Satan and his cohorts the Christian must be alert (1 Pet. 5: 8), armed (Eph. 6: 13) and aware (Jas. 4: 7). Because of the work of Christ believers are assured of victory (Col. 2: 13 - 15) given by God's grace and received through our obedience. The blood of the Lamb defeats the irritable and dangerous lion.

We must not limit spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is rightly against astrology, ouija boards, fortune-telling, tarot cards, levitation, spiritism, satanism and possibly even the darker side of Halloween, heavy rock music, and religious or quasi-religious practices which seek to obscure the deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Spiritual warfare is also against the two most deadly sins in human History - pride and unbelief.

STUDY 7. Humanity (Man)

Four main points

1. Created
2. Nature
3. Depravity
4. Destiny

1. Created

Reading:

Gen. 1: 26 - 27; Acts 17: 26; Jas. 3: 9 - 10
KTT 113 - 120
H & W 68 - 70; 71 - 74

2. Nature

Reading:

Gen. 2: 7; Mt. 10: 28; Heb. 4: 14; 1 Thess. 5: 23; 1 Cor. 15: 22
KTT 120 - 128
H & W 70 - 71; 73

3. Depravity

Reading:

Gen. 8: 21; Ps. 51: 5; Job 14: 1, 4; Jn. 3: 6; Rom. 3: 23
KTT 128 - 148
H & W 82 - 83 (if possible 74 - 81 but very difficult)

4. Destiny

Reading:

KTT 149 - 159
H & W 90 - 93 (if possible 84 - 94 but very difficult)
Heb. 9: 27; Rom. 6: 23; Rev. 21: 8

1. Created

In common with other living beings God created mankind. God created the first man 'Adam' (meaning literally 'ground' – 'earthling') from the earth. What it actually means to be made in the image of God (Gen. 1: 27) is difficult. Clues to understanding this can be gained by considering those things that distinguish mankind from other creatures.

Human beings have personality, the capacity for abstract thought and the very important gift of sensible speech. These give rise to immense potential. Human beings have a notion of morality, conscience and thoughts of right and wrong. Adam was given dominion over creation and responsibility. Potential and responsibility are coupled in humanity. At its best humanity is marked by culture, creativity, relationships and society. However, when marred, each of these shows some of the worst aspects of mankind. Abuse of human responsibility has led to some of the greatest tragedies in the world. Some of these are more obvious than others. Wars and violence are a clear departure from the purposes of God, but so is using the resources of the earth selfishly and irresponsibly, the so-called 'environmental issues' that are in the news at present.

Mankind was created to be in an intimate relationship with God, and has a spiritual dimension. God created Adam in a state of innocence, trusting and open in his fellowship with God. This relationship was nonetheless based on free choices. It was the exercise of these free choices that caused death to enter into the human experience. Adam was not created incapable of death but death does not seem to be God's intention for man.

Though the traditional teaching uses the generic term 'man' to mean all human beings (i.e. not excluding women) the modern emphasis is for language to be inclusive and therefore it is better to use 'mankind', 'humankind' and 'humanity' when possible.

2. Nature

Popular thought divides the human being up into body, soul and spirit. The Bible also uses the terms 'body' 'soul' and 'spirit'. The distinction between "soul" and "spirit" is blurred and it is hard to define the difference. Therefore, there has been some debate in the past about whether a human being is composed of two or three parts. This can, however, give rise to some dangerous teaching that must be opposed.

Hebrew thought did not carry within the scope of its ideas the duality of body and soul which owes a lot to Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato. 'Body' and 'soul' are in a sense convenient pegs on which to hang our thoughts. However, it is impossible to separate body and soul in a real way. The world of the New Testament was an environment in which the language and the concepts of the Greek philosophers needed to be used. The relationship between the Old and New Testament is at this point very complex and needs to be held together carefully.

Adam, along with the beasts, was created from the dust of the earth. The breath of God animated him (Gen. 2: 7). The real distinction is not between body and soul but between body and life. In Hebrew thought the essence of life 'nephesh' was a misty vapour in the blood. A human being neither has a soul nor has a body, for the person is a unity. The two factors of the dust of the ground and the breath of life from God unite in a single, harmonious result. A human being without the breath of life is not a person but a corpse; and the breath of life without a body is not a person either. God formed man and gave him the breath of life – then he became a living being.

The body is important and to be respected. The weakness and mortality of the body are evidence of sin. Both the mind and the body need to be renewed. Coming alive to God by the Holy Spirit anticipates the renewal through death and resurrection.

3. Depravity

In the Bible Adam is seen as the natural head of the human race. Sin is a combination of unbelief and disobedience. As all are 'in Adam' the sin of Adam affects the whole human race. This has led to the doctrine of "original sin". In short this means that every human being has a persistent tendency to go against God's will. All are subject to the law of sin (which has a bias or a pull away from God). Whether sin is hereditary or learned makes very little difference in practice but like most things it is a combination of both factors.

This has given rise to the expression 'total depravity'. Total depravity does not mean that human beings or individuals are as bad as they possibly can be but that they are spoiled in every part by sin and are unable to be acceptable before a holy and righteous God. The pattern is something like: unbelief, disobedience, guilt, condemnation, separation and death.

Three understandings of sin are useful. Firstly, it is falling short of the target (Rom. 3: 23). Secondly, it is straying from the path (trespassing) and, thirdly, it is disobeying God's commandments.

The fall of Adam from his position of communion with God has affected the whole human race. Reconciliation with God is necessary but this is only possible by his grace. It is the human experience that though men and women would like to love and serve God and do what is right that they find themselves unable to achieve even their own modest targets. Even in the supposed exercise of human freewill people often choose what it is hurtful to God, others and themselves.

The relationship between God and humankind and individual human beings is inter-linked. Therefore one broken relationship breaks the whole.

4. Destiny

The relationship between divine sovereignty and human freewill is a mystery. It is human nature to want a clear scheme of things but this is often impossible. The modern trend is to side-step these issues. Some regard the whole notion of divine judgment as somewhat primitive while others seem to teach that all are forgiven because Christ has died for all 'universalism'. Neither of these are orthodox Christian views. No Christian denomination officially accepts them.

The major schools of thought are those taught by Augustine (popularly called 'Calvinism' after the Reformer) and the Dutch theologian Arminius ('Arminianism'). Calvinism stresses divine sovereignty. (It is the view adopted by the XXXIX Articles of the Church of England; the Baptist Confessions of Faith; the Reformed Churches -- URC, FIEC, Presbyterian). The danger with this scheme is that some have made it fatalistic -- i.e. God has chosen those who are to be saved 'the elect' and there is nothing that any of us can do about it. (The other side of the coin is that God must therefore have excluded some -- 'the reprobate').

Wesley favoured and refined the Arminian scheme, stressing human freewill and the necessity for a personal response to God's grace. The danger is that it can make the human response rather than divine grace the ground for salvation (i.e. semi-pelagianism). Critics of Arminianism accuse it of being universalism dressed-up because it insists that Christ died for all (if only in a potential fashion). Though the Arminianism of the Wesleys comes through strongly in their hymns there is a subtlety with phrases such as 'Thy sovereign grace to all extends'.

The difference between death as a spiritual state and physical death is not always clear in the Bible. What are we to make of eternal death? Immortality does not simply mean survival. It points to a quality as well as a quantity of life.

STUDY 8 Salvation (Soteriology)

Four main points

1. Grace
2. Atonement
3. Justification
4. Sanctification and Perseverance

1. Grace

Reading:

1 Cor. 1: 23 - 24; Eph 2: 1 - 10; Titus 3: 5; 1 Pet. 1: 23
H & W 136 - 141 (cf STUDY 5)

2. Atonement

Reading:

Mk. 10: 45; Rom. 3: 25; 2 Cor. 5: 21; Heb. 10: 14; 1 Pet. 2: 24
KTT 189 – 204, 205 – 214
H & W 115 - 127 (limited section - read quickly)

3. Justification

Reading:

Ps 32: 1, 2; Ezek 18: 31 - 32; Rom. 3: 20 - 31, 5: 1; Gal. 2 : 20
KTT 227 – 238
H & W 141 - 145 (cf STUDY 5)

4. Sanctification and Perseverance

Reading:

1 Thess. 5: 23; 2 Tim. 1: 12; Heb 6: 4 - 6; Mt. 13: 20, 21;
KTT 238 – 253
H & W 145 - 152 (cf STUDY 5)

1. Grace

The initiative in human salvation rests with God. The very fact that any are to be saved from the consequences of their unbelief and disobedience is only by the grace of God.

It is important to recognise that God seeks after men and women before they ever seek after God. The emphasis is always that of God coming to seek after and to save the lost. Human beings have a bias toward sin and away from God. It is God's prevenient grace that enables a person with a bias to sin to turn to God. Through the operation of God's grace the Holy Spirit creates a desire in the hearts of men and women to be reconciled to God.

God invites all people everywhere to repent, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to accept the salvation that is offered through the Gospel. The basis of this salvation is the death of Christ. The cross is therefore absolutely critical. The resurrection is proof that Christ's death was truly effective.

By the grace of God a person is brought to a position of repentance and the Bible speaks of conversion to a new life, which is expressed both as the new birth and adoption into a new family. The new birth is not a human accomplishment but a supernatural work of God. A distinction is sometimes made between the external calling to all who hear and the inward or effectual calling to those who actually repent and believe the Gospel.

Justice, mercy and grace are helpfully distinguished in this way. Justice is getting what one deserves. Mercy is not getting something unwelcome that one would otherwise deserve. Grace is getting something welcome that one does not deserve. God's grace is free and unmerited. We cannot earn it but we can respond to it and choose to receive all its benefits. Grace is not without cost, it is God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

2. Atonement

Just as there are many effects of sin, so there are many aspects to the atonement. Atonement literally means cover. In the Old Testament the ritual of the Temple, or of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, had its high point in the Day of Atonement (*yom kippur*). On this day Aaron, and his successors in the office of High Priest, took the blood of the sacrificial animal into the Holy of Holies (NIV most holy place) to make atonement for the sins of the people. The blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the mercy seat (NIV atonement cover). The sinner could therefore be reconciled to God because sins had been covered.

Atonement now embraces the whole theme of redemption through the blood of Christ. The sacrificial death that the Temple ritual anticipated is fulfilled in Christ's death on the cross. He is the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb of God. The sinner may therefore be covered by the blood of Christ and acquitted of charges that would otherwise lead to judgment. In his obedience Christ achieved victory over sin and death. Jesus Christ is therefore a great example to us all that we may follow in his steps. He is a new representative head of the human race 'a second Adam'.

An important theme in the atonement has also been the idea of Christ as ransom or redeemer. There is the notion here that one pays the price for others. There is a danger in pushing any of these illustrations too far. Ransom is not quite the same as our modern notion of a payment to kidnappers for this would force us into the dead-end of wondering to whom the ransom was paid. Rather it carries the sense of compensation so that the requirements of justice in putting right a wrong are met.

Two difficult words are sometimes used in relation to the atonement. 'Propitiation' means that which is offered in order to meet the demands of justice and the wrath of God. 'Expiation' carries the idea of wiping the slate clean.

3. Justification

Justification is clearly a legal word relating to justice. Our Bible translations need to translate a family of Greek words that are related (justice - justify - righteous). The idea is that of judicial acquittal or remission of sins.

Remission of sins is based wholly on the Lord's atoning sacrifice. The benefits of this are appropriated by faith. What is often called justification by faith is more accurately described as justification by grace through faith. That is by faith the Christian receives the work of Christ and comes under its benefits. This is sometimes called the Covenant of Grace.

Justification is entirely a work of grace. It is unmerited and not by works which an individual might have done. Good works, pleading, self-sacrifice, giving all one's goods are of no use. There is also the hidden danger of making faith a human work, that is thinking that one is saved because one has faith - but even this faith is not of ourselves but a gift from God.

Justification is a one off event. It is to do with our legal status. The sinner is in a wrong standing before God. Justification brings the sinner into a right standing before God. That is an act of God, the judge, alone. The sinner does not cease to be a sinner but is no longer counted as one. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner.

Justification may helpfully be distinguished from forgiveness even though initially they are the same. A believer is moved from a wrong standing before God to a right standing before God. At that moment a believer is both justified and forgiven and experiences the benefits and peace with God that come from forgiveness. However, even in that new standing before God one can fall into sin. One does not need to be re-justified but one, sadly, needs to be forgiven over and over again.

4. Sanctification and Perseverance

The Christian is called to a life of holiness, of good works and preparing for life in the eternal Kingdom of God. The question of whether a Christian can be made holy in this life has perplexed theologians throughout the years. Sanctification means setting apart by the Holy Spirit for God. God expects a life of personal holiness from every Christian person. The believer is set apart from sin through repentance and receives an initial sanctification by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A Christian who is in close fellowship with God through Christ is more acutely aware of the cross and of personal sin and consequently is more mindful of these in daily living.

Much has been made of the various theories of sanctification (eradication - rooting out the evil principle; suppression - crucifying the old nature; counteraction - rendering the old nature helpless) but these need neither be pressed too hard nor rendered as alternatives.

Wesley and consequently Methodism teaches that entire sanctification / Scriptural holiness / perfect love is possible in this life, and can come about in an instant by faith. Wesley did not teach sinless perfection but that it was possible, at least in theory, for a Christian to know freedom from the habitual practice of sin. But the exact relationship between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh is a problem. In short the Methodist belief is that the righteousness of Christ may also be imparted and known by faith in this life and not only imputed in a judicial sense.

The doctrine sometimes called the perseverance of the saints is probably better called the preservation of the saints. The question needing to be answered is whether a person who has been saved can lose that salvation? The traditional Methodist view that it is possible is not now very popular.

STUDY 9. The Christian

Four main points

1. The New Man
2. Communing with God
3. Witnessing to the World
4. Faith, Hope, Love

1. The New Man

Reading:

Eph. 2: 8, 9; Eph. 3: 14, 15; Eph. 4: 17 - 5: 2; 2 Cor. 5: 17
Luke 14: 26, 27; 1 Cor. 6: 19, 20; Heb. 11: 8 - 16, 13: 14
KTT 255 – 257

2. Communing with God

Reading:

Matt. 4: 1 - 11; 2 Tim. 3: 14 - 16
Eph. 3: 14 - 19; Matt. 6: 9 - 13

3. Witnessing to the World

Reading:

Luke 24: 46 - 48; 1 Thess. 2: 7 - 13
Acts 8: 1 - 4; Acts 4: 18 - 20; Acts 2: 14, 42 - 47
KTT 257 – 258

4. Faith, Hope, Love

Reading:

1 Peter 1: 3 - 9; Titus 2: 13; Rev. 22: 20
1 Cor. 13: 1 - 13; Col. 3: 12 – 17

1. The New Man

It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians - probably as a term of abuse. The idea of the new man (or as we might say these days – ‘the new person’) is an important theme particularly in the New Testament. This is related to the idea of the new birth or regeneration.

We start out in life in a state of unbelief and disobedience but by the grace of God, a free gift received by faith, we can know a new life in Christ. People who did not know God and did not belong to him are called, by his grace, to be sons of the living God. The new man is a member of God’s family by virtue of receiving Christ as Lord and Saviour. The New Testament includes ideas both of being born anew into the family of God and adopted into God’s family.

The Christian in the new life is also a disciple of Jesus Christ. Disciple could be translated ‘student’ but it is not only a matter of learning but responding to the call of Jesus by following him. The idea of journey is important throughout the Bible. Many of the important Old Testament figures had no permanent home of their own. Christians are therefore urged to concentrate on spiritual rather than earthly gain. Christians are pilgrims in an alien environment for the Christian’s citizenship is in heaven. The Christian looks forward to the eternal city of God in the future but continues as an ambassador for that city while here on earth.

In the Old Testament the temple was thought to be the place where God was especially present. In the New Testament Paul says that the individual bodies of Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit. This means that our lives should be kept pure and holy as is fitting for the habitation of God, and that all our abilities and powers should be turned to the glory of God and the service of his kingdom.

2. Communing with God

Two important ways of communing with God are through Bible reading and prayer. It is a mistake to see these as one-way channels of communication whereby God speaks to us through the Bible and we speak to God through prayer. Clearly the whole thing is a good deal more complex than that.

There are many ways in which God speaks to us. He speaks through creation and through other Christians but supremely he has spoken to us in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, to whom the written Word of God, the Scriptures, bear witness. The Bible therefore is a very important way in which God makes himself known to us. The presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer confirm the witness of the Bible.

The Bible directs the Christian for life, corrects wrong ideas and guides the Christian in the path of obedience and service. The Bible is also a weapon of spiritual power demonstrated by the fact that Jesus himself used it to overcome temptation in the wilderness. Reading the Bible strengthens Christian knowledge and faith. A balanced faith is maintained by wide and careful study of the Scriptures. This equips the Christian both for faithful worship and service. The words of the Bible are useful to express our thoughts and praises to God.

Prayer is God's chosen way of fellowship with his people. It is not so much a technique, whereby God is manipulated to do our will, but a steady relationship through which the works and will of God become known. Prayer strengthens the inner resources of the Christian, and should be disciplined and regular.

The form of prayer (extempore or written) is of less importance than the state of heart of the person praying. Prayer sustains a living relationship with God and is not just vain words.

3. Witnessing to the World

It is primarily through Christian witness that God has chosen to continue the proclamation of his message to the world. In a sense witnessing ought to be a way of life for the Christian rather than something that happens on particular occasions.

To be a witness is different from being an advocate or an ambassador. The Christian faith needs advocates and ambassadors but a witness is called to speak his or her own personal testimony. This distinguishes witnessing from preaching and perhaps even from evangelising.

The Christian faith is not concerned with a series of rules and regulations. Christian living is not even a matter of agreeing to a certain number of propositions. Christianity is concerned with the person of Jesus, knowing him, loving him, obeying him and serving him.

From the New Testament it seems that the early Christians found little difficulty in witnessing for they had all experienced the transforming power of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in their own lives. Every Christian is inevitably called to be a witness of the Saviour. The Christian will, as a natural part of testifying, want to explain the truth about Jesus and share the love of Jesus.

Jesus said that the mark of his disciples was to be the presence of love in their fellowship. Love is not something that can be worked up by trying hard - it is a gift from God. The whole essence of Christian witness therefore is to be a channel and an interpreter of the gifts that God gives to his people.

The apostles found it was impossible to keep silent about Christ. The closer we are to Christ the more we find that others come to see the impact of Christ on our lives.

4. Faith, Hope, Love

The Christian life is marked by all kinds of characteristics. Christians are people who are being saved and so salvation, peace with God, union with Christ and the journey to eternal life are all important. Paul singles out faith, hope and love as three abiding characteristics in the Christian's experience.

The most important thing about faith is not how much of it an individual has but who the object of the faith is. Faith is complete and unreserved trust in God as faithful to the promises contained in his Word and more particularly in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Faith has an emotive element but it has objective content. Christ, who died and rose again and is alive for evermore, is the one in whom the Christian has faith. He is the 'author and perfecter of our faith' (Heb. 12: 2) in whom and through whom the Christian knows redemption, the forgiveness of sins. The Apostles proclaimed this message and those who responded and confessed Jesus as risen Lord and Saviour came to be known as believers. Faith is sometimes helpfully rendered 'Forsaking all I trust Him'.

It is the historic nature of the Christian faith - culminating in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus - that gives the Christian an eager expectation of a final inheritance in glory. It is a hope that the past is forgiven, the present is covered and there is a future in Christ.

Love in its very highest sense is the very nature of God. The clearest expression of the love of God is in Christ's death on Calvary's cross. So as not to confuse divine and Christian love with family or sensual or erotic love the New Testament used a very unusual word in Greek 'agape' (AV 'Charity'). We must not confuse one kind of love for another. 'Agape' is unconditional, self-giving, costly, pure, forgiving and most of all it is eternal. In practice it means to love as Jesus loves.

STUDY 10 The Church

Four main points

1. Characteristics
2. Nature
3. Purpose
4. Ministry

1. Characteristics

Reading:

Matt. 18: 20; Acts 2: 42; Eph. 4: 4 - 6; Heb. 12: 22, 23
KTT 259 – 260, 265 – 273, 297 - 308
H & W 153 - 159

2. Nature

Reading:

1 Peter 2: 4, 5; Eph. 5: 25 - 27; 1 Cor. 12: 12 - 31
Eph. 2: 19; 3: 14, 15; Eph. 6: 12; Heb. 13: 14
KTT 260 – 265

3. Purpose

Reading:

1 Pet. 4: 12 - 14; Matt. 28: 18 - 20; 1 Tim. 3: 15
1 John 3: 17, 18; Phil. 2: 5 - 7
KTT 273 – 275, 280 - 282

4. Ministry

Reading:

Rom. 12: 4 - 8; Acts 6: 1 - 6; 1 Tim 3: 1 - 13; Tit 1: 6 - 9
KTT 275 -280
H & W 160 – 166

1. Characteristics

The Church is basically a gathering of Christian people for Jesus promised that where two or three gathered in his name he would be there with them. This may be called the 'Local Church'. On another level there are many such gatherings in a sense united by the presence of Jesus, the 'Universal Church'. Questions about the relationship between the Universal Church and the Local Churches have often caused Christians to be deeply divided.

Two common distinctions are made in looking at the Church. Those who have died in the faith of Christ are said to be part of the 'Church Triumphant', those who continue to worship and serve in this life are the 'Church Militant'. Organisationally the Church is the company of people that gather together, what may be called the 'visible Church', but because God alone knows the people who are his there is also the notion of the 'invisible Church'. To be a member of the institutional or visible Church is not necessarily the same as being right with God but a Christian, in obedience to God, will want to be in fellowship with other Christians in a Local Church.

The Congregational idea is that the Local Church is the most important and that two or three gathering in the Lord's name is the hallmark of the Church. The Episcopal idea is that Historical continuity is the hallmark of the Church, which is mainly passed through the ordinances of the Church and its ministry. Methodists (and Presbyterians) fall somewhere in the middle, regarding both ideas as important.

The expression in the Creed provides four useful adjectives when it says about 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. The essential unity of the Church is in Christ its head. It is to be holy because it is to be presented before God. It is catholic in the sense of universal as it welcomes people from all nations. It is apostolic because it retains the apostles' teaching.

2. Nature

The New Testament uses many illustrations to describe the Church. In relation to Christ it is the company of people who are being built up by him, protected by him, purified by him, interceded for by him because they are the people who have known his saving love and are being prepared for his eternal kingdom.

The Church is said to be a firm building. Though physical buildings have some value (as well as being a monumental drain on our resources) the New Testament is more concerned to speak about a spiritual building composed of living stones, dependent on one another but founded on Christ.

A relationship of deep intimacy is suggested by the notion of the Church as the virgin bride. Christ loves the Church and has made it pure and faultless by his death.

The picture of the Church as a body, with Christ as its head, emphasises that the Church is a living organism and not primarily an organisation. No member of the body is disposable and no member of the body is of over-riding importance.

The Church is also the family of God. This points very clearly to the relationship between Christians and God, the heavenly Father. In the early Church it was particularly noticeable that the barriers that set people apart in the world were irrelevant in the Church.

The New Testament also makes brief mention of the Church as an army for God. The weapons of victory are God's but the Church is called to serve him faithfully in a hostile world.

The security of the eternal city of God is also shown by the life of the Church. The Christian's fellowship in the Church is, at its best, an anticipation of the Kingdom of God.

3. Purpose

The main purpose of the Church is to bring glory to God. In all that it does, it should direct attention and praise to God as it bears fruit in worship, in faithful service and as it reflects the love of God in the world.

Reaching out to others in the name of Christ is usually termed mission. Mission is sometimes unhelpfully divided into evangelism and service but this is to miss the point. The Church that seeks only to serve the world without naming the name of Christ is missing as vital a point as the Church that seeks only to add converts to the roll without thinking about the need to serve the whole person and community. Jesus himself was the proclaimer of words and the performer of deeds and both activities are necessary if the mission of the Church is to be authentic.

The Church is also called upon to guard the truth of the Gospel. At the heart of this is the position of the Bible within the Church. God in Christ, through the message of the Bible, which is applied through the work of the Church, reaches out and calls men and women to repentance, faith and discipleship. It is the task of the Church to announce that Jesus Christ, once crucified for the sins of the world, is now risen Lord and that forgiveness and peace with God to all eternity are available to all.

From the early centuries of the Christian Church statements as to the fundamentals of Christian belief (Creeds) have been prepared. These ensure a continuity of basic beliefs and a unity can be found between the Churches on the basis of these and the Bible. The Creeds teach the Doctrines of the Trinity and the full deity and full humanity of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Bible, at the centre of the Church's life and practice, corrects the unruly and those who are in error within the Church and challenges evil in the world.

4. Ministry

The teaching about Ministry is one of the most notoriously controversial areas of Christian Doctrine. The range of views is from those who recognise no separate form of Ministry at all to those for whom proper Ordination (Order) is a fundamental mark of the Church.

It seems clear from the Bible that different people are called to exercise different offices within the Church. The implication is that some are called to particular kinds of ministry. The Pastoral Epistles use three words to describe Ministers who were set apart by the laying on of hands and prayer - deacons, elders (presbyters) and overseers (bishops). Most scholars accept that 'elder' and 'overseer' are used interchangeably and that a three-fold order of hierarchical Ministry is not taught in Scripture. (That need not of course necessarily rule out its usefulness for the Church.)

A considerable number of errors are caused by the translation of 'presbyter' as 'priest'. There is no notion in the New Testament of the Christian Minister being a sacrificing priest. Methodists believe that though it is useful to have Ordained Ministers that 'they hold no priesthood differing in kind' from other Christians.

British Methodist Ministers are not ordained by bishops and because of this their Ministry is not technically recognised by episcopal Churches (e.g. Anglican, R.C.) In turn the Roman Catholic Church does not, at least in theory, recognise the Ministry of other Christian Churches. However, in practice there is considerable variation in these matters from one area to another.

The 'priesthood of all believers' is an important doctrine asserted by the Reformers. It means that all Christians share equally in the Ministry of Christ. It need not mean, however, that therefore all Christians are equally called to every service.

STUDY 11 The Means of Grace

Four main points

1. Private Devotions
2. Public Worship
3. Baptism
4. The Lord's Supper

1. Private Devotions

Reading:

KTT 293 – 296
H & W 166 - 167
John 16: 24; Rom. 8: 26, 27; 2 Tim. 3: 14 - 16

2. Public Worship

Reading:

KTT 283 – 284
H & W 167 - 168
Acts 2: 42 - 47; Col. 3: 15 - 17

3. Baptism

Reading:

KTT 284 – 289
H & W 168 - 173
Matt. 28: 19; Acts 2: 38; Rom. 6: 3 - 5; Tit. 3: 5; Col. 2: 11

4. The Lord's Supper

Reading:

KTT 289 – 293
H & W 173 - 178
Matt. 26: 26 - 28; 1 Cor. 11: 23 - 29

1. Private Devotions

Broadly this is prayer and Bible Study, though devotional reading and other practices (e.g. meditation) could be added. The Christian life is about communing with God and serving him. The chief means of communing with God and knowing his will are prayer and Bible Study.

Hammond says:

The nature of prayer is very far from being generally understood. To many Christians it is merely an instrument for obtaining deliverance from awkward situations or the obtaining of something which is desired ... It is the result of our Lord's High Priestly work that the individual Christian has now the right of direct access to the throne of God. This in itself should give a dignity and value to all prayer which other exercises of the soul may lack ... God has connected special blessing with the united prayer of the Church.

The Word of God is the means of grace in three ways. (1) It is the medium through which God makes himself known when it is read either privately or publicly. (2) In Christian preaching it is the instrument God normally uses to produce conviction of sin, saving faith and sanctification. (3) It is connected closely with all the other means of grace.

There seems to be no doubt that the Christian will derive great benefit from the practice of a daily personal devotion. These need to take whatever form works for the individual. Prayer is not a technique. We need to learn from Jesus the value and importance of regular prayer. Prayer enables us to grow as Christians, to serve God, to praise God and to experience God. The Bible directs the Christian life, equips the Christian for battle, energises the Christian for service, corrects the Christian from error, develops faith and teaches God's will.

2. Public Worship

There is a natural relationship between private devotions and public worship. If those who gather together in public worship are devout Christians then a quality of the knowledge and presence of God will be discernible.

It is true that a Christian can worship anywhere but there is an emphasis in Scripture on the gathering together of the people of God, as if God delighted in the gathering, every bit as much as we delight in the best of family gatherings.

All the important elements from our private devotions come to the surface in public worship. The Christian is uplifted, challenged, encouraged by the prayers, worship and gathering around the Scriptures that is experienced when meeting with the people of God. The place of the exposition of the Scriptures is very important:

While the Holy Spirit is the true giver of full understanding, the individual Christian's capacity for the reception of divine teaching is limited. One of the means provided by God for increase in the capacity for reception and in the knowledge of divine things is the spoken ministry of the Word of God ... Preaching is 'truth expressed through personality' and too much emphasis cannot be laid on the value to the Christian of the stimulus to deeper study supplied by the wider experience of the true Christian minister.

The ministry of the Word of God and the proclamation of the truth are vital in authentic Christian Worship. We tell forth the truth about God in the context of acknowledging the truth about ourselves. The acceptance of Christianity's revealed truth is essential. False teaching is opposed throughout the Bible and especially in the New Testament letters. The teaching of the Church is not only to be learned in theory but also to be practised.

3. Baptism

The Protestant Church acknowledges just two sacraments - Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are means through which the constant activity of God becomes more fully known. It is not the sacramental action that confers the grace of God (*ex opere operato*, 'by the act performed') but through faith the sacraments may help us receive the grace of God.

Baptism is the means of entry to the visible church. Two important areas of symbolism in baptism are purification and dying and rising with Christ. Those who hold that purification for sins is the more important are generally satisfied that the amount of water makes very little difference. Baptists, however, regard dying and rising as very important and so see immersion as the very essence of baptism.

The major controversy in baptism is not how much water should be used but who are suitable candidates for baptism. The simpler view is that of the "Baptist" denominations. In this point of view certain qualifications are required of the candidate - namely, a definite profession of faith in Christ and an avowal of allegiance to him; a certain knowledge of Christian doctrine; a renunciation of the old life and old allegiances. Such a candidate is baptised as a believer, on profession of faith.

The paedobaptist view stresses the grace of God rather than the response of faith. Baptism is seen as the successor to circumcision as the sign of the covenant with the people of God. In Christendom this resulted in the so-called indiscriminate baptism of all children. As Christian belief and practice continue to decline the Church is faced with the dilemma of how much commitment (faith) to require on the part of the parents of those presented in baptism. Confirmation (or similar) is offered by those denominations that baptise infants while Baptists dedicate babies.

4. The Lord's Supper

Nearly all Christians are agreed as to the obligation to share in the Lord's Supper resting on the followers of Christ. The bread and wine are elements of the Lord's death. Receiving the bread and wine also constitute an act of profession of faith on the part of those who share. There is also the dimension of Christians sharing together in the fellowship of Christ.

The question as to the nature of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper has caused considerable disagreement among Christians. The Roman Catholic view is that Christ is present in a physical sense and that the bread and wine change (transubstantiation) into the body and blood of Christ at the consecration. Protestants regard this as a wooden interpretation of the words of institution.

The Reformed view is generally found in one of two forms in English-speaking countries. The first is that the Lord's Supper is merely a sign or symbol, a memorial of the death of Christ (Zwingli). Baptists commonly hold this view. A second view is that the Lord's Supper is a celebration of the spiritual presence of Christ as a seal and pledge of what God does for believers (Calvin).

Methodist theology of the Lord's Supper is very difficult because of the High-Church background of the Wesleys reflected in the collection of *Hymns for the Lord's Supper*. Generally these affirm the latter Reformed view outlined above.

It is commonly believed that the Lord's Table is open to all in the Methodist Church and in practice this is true. However, in theory communion is for the baptised members of our Church and occasional visitors from other Churches. Historically receiving communion was very much linked with membership. Latterly controversy has centred on whether children may receive communion and if so at what age.

STUDY 12

Future Things (Eschatology)

Four main points

1. Personal Return
2. Millennium
3. Judgment
4. New Order

1. Personal Return

Reading:

KTT 312 – 322

H & W 179 - 184

Acts 1: 10 - 11; 1 Thess. 4: 15 - 17; 2 Pet. 3: 3 - 4, 8 - 10

2. Millennium

Reading:

Mt. 24: 3, 21, 29 - 30, 37, 40 - 41; Rev. 20: 4 - 6, 7 - 9;

Rev. 21: 1 - 4

KTT 322 – 327

3. Judgment

Reading:

KTT 309 – 312, 327 - 338

H & W 184 - 191

1 Cor. 15: 20 - 23, 51 - 52; Acts 17: 31; Heb. 9: 27; Mt. 13: 47

4. New Order

Reading:

KTT 338 – 347

H & W 191 - 192

Dan. 12: 3; John 14: 2, 3; 1 Pet. 1: 3 – 4

1. Personal Return

The Bible teaches that Jesus will return and although it never uses the expression 'Second Coming' this is a convenient way of distinguishing the future advent of Christ (sometimes called the 'Parousia') from his advent at Bethlehem, or spiritual presence with his people.

There are numerous predictions in Scripture which refer to the coming and kingly rule of Christ which clearly are not fulfilled by the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus himself gave the Apostles the assurance that he would come again.

Before the return of Christ we may expect to see disorder in the world. The Bible phrase 'the last times' could mean any time between the ascension and the Parousia and it is wise not to speculate too closely about the moment of Christ's return for no one knows that time. Nevertheless, disorder in the world, famine, earthquake, plague; people who are materialistic, arrogant and immoral; wars, revolutions and political disturbances; hatred and division even in the family; aimlessness; and numerous false teachers are all signs of chaos giving the Christian the opportunity to proclaim order and hope in the Gospel of Christ.

The return of Jesus will not be secret or hidden. To some the sudden appearing of Jesus and his retinue will be glorious but others will be dismayed. (The parables contain a great amount of teaching on these points.)

The appearing of Jesus Christ will bring this age to an end. All governments, nations and authorities of every kind will be brought under his rule and judgment. In the face of his majesty and power all will have to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. The triumphant Jesus Christ will overthrow the whole empire of evil.

2. Millennium

Some believe that the second coming of Christ will either be preceded or followed by a millennium (thousand years). The three common views are pre-millennialism, post-millennialism and amillennialism.

Pre-millennialism teaches that Christ will return prior to a literal thousand year period and prior to the seven year period known as the Great Tribulation (pre-tribulational). Christ returns secretly for the Church and then in glory with the Church. This view (Pre-millennial, pre-tribulational is often called 'Dispensationalism' - for short! and is to be found in the footnotes of the 'Scofield' Bible and in the works of J N Darby.)

Some believe that Christ will return before the millennium (pre-millennialist) but after the Great Tribulation. According to this view the Church does go through the Tribulation.

However, such literal interpretations as these sit uncomfortably with other Scriptures, which represent the coming Kingdom as spiritual and universal. The passage itself does not mention the Jews or an earthly kingdom where Jesus will rule.

Post-millennialism holds that the second coming of Christ will follow a period (not necessarily a literal thousand years) during which the Gospel will be welcomed. But this does not seem to fit in with what the Bible tells us about the general apostasy before the end of the age.

In the amillennial view, the thousand years are taken to be symbolic. The binding of Satan for a thousand years simply means that he is completely bound.

This is a notorious area of disagreement among those who believe in the personal and visible return of Christ.

3. Judgment

The final judgment is a definite future event that will take place when Christ returns in glory. By his actions God will be shown to be completely righteous. Every power that has stood in opposition to God will be subject to Jesus Christ. Christ will receive the glory and worship that is his due. The basis of judgment will be the response that individuals have made to the light that God has given them. Entering into the Kingdom of God or separation from the Kingdom of God is in effect a decisive underlining of the choices that men and women have already made.

The Bible knows nothing of purgatory or limbo. There is no middle ground. At the general resurrection there is eternal life in heaven for those who are in Christ and eternal death in hell for those who are not. The Scriptural imagery relating to both heaven and hell is difficult to interpret. A sentimental interpretation should be resisted. Abiding in the eternal presence and glory of God is impossible to express. So is the horror of exclusion. The word 'Hades' (Heb. *Sheol*) or abode of the dead is a word that the Bible seems to use loosely to mean a number of things. On the other hand hell (Gk. *Gehenna*) is a place of destruction. Whether destruction means torment or annihilation is hard to say though traditionally it has meant the former and in any event it is to be avoided.

Christians will not be judged on the basis of sins that they have committed. These are dealt with by the work of Christ on the cross and the Christian is fully absolved from sin. But the work of Christians will be measured and so faithful Christians are encouraged to serve the Master throughout life.

Satan has power in this age but Jesus Christ has decisively overcome him, through his cross and resurrection. Judgment will bring the triumph of Christ to completion. God will completely and eternally overthrow Satan and his cohorts.

4. New Order

Revelation describes a new heaven and a new earth. Though some think of heaven as a condition the Bible teaches that it is a place. God recreates the universe destroying the old order by fire. The final home of those whom God receives into his Kingdom is described in terms of the New Jerusalem. The reward of the righteous is described as eternal life, that is, not merely endless life, but life in all its fullness, without any of the imperfections or disturbances of the present. Perfect fellowship and the worship of God are the characteristics of such life.

Christians are raised from death to enjoy eternal life with God. At the resurrection the body is spiritual (that is suited to a totally different order) but there is continuity with what went before. Reminders of death, decay and disease will be banished from the spiritual body.

Heavenly worship will be of God and of Jesus Christ, the Lamb:

Come, let us join our cheerful songs
With angels round the throne;
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues
But all their joys are one.

Worthy the Lamb that died, they cry,
To be exalted thus;
Worthy the Lamb, our hearts reply,
For he was slain for us.

Jesus is worthy to receive
Honour and power divine;
And blessings more than we can give,
Be, Lord, for ever Thine.

(Isaac Watts)