

The Baptist College of Florida

I BELIEVE: A CREDO

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The Doctrine of Revelation

The Christian God is uniquely a God of revelation. God speaks and makes Himself known. This is the only way that human beings can know anything about Him, for He is Creator and as such stands above and apart from all created reality. The creature only knows God because God comes and makes Himself known to the creature (Matt. 11:27). In the past God has revealed Himself in many ways at many times, but in these last days He has spoken with finality by means of His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1). Jesus is personally the revelation of God, the Word or Speech of God (John 1:1). Whatever God has said, He has said in Christ. All revelation before the Incarnation was even then a word of Christ (John 5:39). God has never spoken and will never speak in any other way than as Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of Christ.

Revelation should only be understood as active speaking. God's revelation is never static or ossified. Revelation is not given over into human hands that man might manipulate, control, or rework the speech of God. While in a certain sense man can preserve the content of God's revelation, even this preserved content is but human speech unless God chooses again to speak through the recorded words.

General Revelation

God chooses to speak in the widest sense by creation. He leaves His fingerprints on all He has made, signs them with His majesty, and calls upon them to declare His glory (Ps. 19:1). Thus creation declares God's power and character at all times in all places (Ps. 19:2-4). This declaration called "general revelation," however, is both heard and not heard. The sound of God's voice does resonate throughout the universe, but the words are unintelligible to mere creatures on their own, particularly in man's present state of corruption and rebellion (Rom. 3:11). Tiny, finite, rebellious, and hard of heart, men are not naturally able to grasp this

revelation. In the end, general revelation can only serve to condemn the hard-hearted race of men who hear God's creative word all around but bury their ears too deeply into the sands of sin to take in the slightest hint of meaning (Rom. 1:18-23). At best the darkened man might only find by examining creation the question of God raised, a question which will only be answered by God Himself. Only by listening in faith can man understand the testimony of God in creation and see His glory. Man must be personally addressed by God in power and the Spirit, awakened to faith, even to know His most ubiquitous words (2 Cor. 4:4-6). Perhaps this nullifies what general revelation is meant to be, but if so the category can be discarded.

Special Revelation

Special revelation means that, beyond the naturally fruitless testimony of all creation to God, God has chosen to specifically and personally reveal Himself to man in humanly intelligible ways. This began from man's very creation, when God immediately blessed Him and gave Him a covenantal vocation (Gen. 1:28-30). Special revelation is divinely initiated: no one can call it forth from God or demand from him. Instead He chooses freely to condescend to human communication. In special revelation God makes use of the limited abilities of human language, sanctifies them, and empowers them by the Spirit to communicate Himself. God can only be known on His own terms, and in revelation God acts so that human language can be used as His terms.

Special revelation, then, is to be identified with God's speaking as Christ, though this in a full-bodied sense. God spoke in the Old Testament toward the Incarnation, and everything He said then conditioned and was conditioned by the coming of Christ in the flesh. God spoke directly in and as Jesus of Nazareth, making His humanity with all its speech identical to the Divine Word, the revealing Speech of God. God spoke in the New Testament after Christ's

ascension as the Spirit led the Apostles to know, understand, and testify to Christ's person and work. Most of what God has said on these occasions has been recorded in the Holy Scriptures, which themselves record revelation in their human form and function as revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit when He chooses to speak. While God may speak by the Spirit in or through whatever He pleases, He has covenantally bound Himself to speak through the Holy Scriptures as the authoritative domain of God's Word as a foundation for His Church.

Inspiration of Scripture

The Scriptures have all been given by the inspiration (or, as Scripture itself refers to it, the breath) of God (2 Tim. 3:16). They are the result of God breathing out in speech, disclosing Himself at first partially in many times and many ways, then ultimately in Jesus Christ, and then in elaboration as the meaning and content of Jesus' person and work were unpacked by the Apostles. God spoke by the Spirit, and for a time specifically in, through, and as Jesus, but also directly to the prophets and the Apostles, and they responded by writing what they heard. In this process, the Spirit continued to move, thus clarifying, reminding, guiding, protecting, and enlightening them that they might clearly see and testify to what God had done and said (2 Pet. 1:20-21). As eyewitnesses and chosen vessels, they were uniquely qualified and authorized to be God's spokespeople in this way (1 Jn. 1:1-3), and the work of the Spirit (along with God's general providence and the authors' ongoing sanctification) ensured that they did not lose their way or in any sense obscure or corrupt the truth by their writing.

From this process, the resulting Scriptures are authoritative for the people of God, entirely reliable, unswervingly faithful to God's self-disclosure, and exempt from all human judgment (instead judging men). The Bible in this finished form is a covenant document,

perhaps a sacramental one, where God has promised to return again and again to speak to His people by the Spirit through the very words He once spoke and the deeds He once did in days of old. In this way God once revealed, continues to reveal, and promises to again reveal Himself in Christ by the Spirit for the life of the Church, and thus the Scriptures by which He does so are rightly called the word of God (John 10:35).

Inerrancy of Scripture

As Scripture is both the word of God and the responsive word of men, it has a unique set of properties. Inasmuch as the Scriptures represent divine speech, they are as true as whatever God might say, and God cannot lie or speak ignorantly (Heb. 6:18). Therefore, the Bible is, by virtue of its role as the covenantal domain of God's word, without error. Nonetheless, none can deny that in the actual texts there are bits which appear to be in error (Mark 2:26). The question as to the nature of these oddities is mostly irrelevant. The truthfulness of Scripture is not a house of cards and is always sustained by the Holy Spirit. It does not seem at all necessary to recognize the apparent errors as actual flaws, but even if they were, the infallible authority of Scripture, indeed the inerrancy of Scripture, lies in the voice of the Holy Spirit as He speaks God's Word to the reader in, with, and through the text. This is not, as one might charge, a subjective process but an objective and uncontestable divine testimony to Jesus Christ (John 5:39), who is Himself the Word of God (John 1:1), by means of human words. Until Christ Himself proves false, along with the Father who blesses Him and the Spirit who testifies of Him, the Holy Scriptures are in the most important sense free of error.

Doctrine of God

There is one God who exists as a Trinity of persons in eternal glory. He is absolutely real and transcendent, a real and objective Being who stands over and against man as Creator. From Him and for Him and to Him are all things, for He is the maker of heaven and earth.

Trinity

There is only one God (Deut. 6:4), one true divine being with one single essence or *ousia*. He is a single Subject, indivisible, who cannot be broken apart. Yet it belongs to the one divine essence to subsist in three distinct Persons, revealed as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Each Person is fully and entirely God, possessing the fullness of the one divine nature in unity with the other Persons. God thus exists as a unity-in-trinity, or a trinity-in-unity, in which the single divine *ousia* exists in a trifold mode of three *hypostases*. The Persons are each distinguished not by any divine attributes of which one person has more or less, for they are all entirely equal and divine, but by their relations to each other. The Father is the Father precisely because He is Father of the Son, for example. Apart from these internal relational distinctions, there is no possible essential or eternal difference to draw between the Persons of the Trinity. They are each essentially equal in power, glory, wisdom, authority, and love. They share one will, intelligence, and emotional life. There is no hierarchy, supremacy, or subordination of any kind within the immanent/ontological Trinity. The Father is an unqualified equal to the Son who is an unqualified equal to the Spirit who is an unqualified equal to the Father. Each has the fullness of the one divine nature, the one divine nature which itself constitutes them as relations of one God. The divine nature both constitutes the relations of the Triune Persons and is constituted by their relations. In these relations, the Father eternally begets the Son, and the Father and the Son eternally spirate the Spirit, but in these cases the generation

neither compromises the aseity of each member nor defines some kind of ontological contingency. Neither should the begetting of the Son or the procession of the Spirit be seen as Persons originating from the unoriginate Person of the Father, but rather the Persons come from the being of the Father, the one *ousia* which each Person fully shares.

In history, God has expressed Himself in a unique Triune economy, and the way the Trinity is expressed in redemptive history is called the economic Trinity. In the economic Trinity, as a general pattern, the Father sends and initiates, the Son obeys and accomplishes, and the Spirit implements and consummates. In this economy the Father clearly takes the ultimate authority (1 Cor. 15:24-28), this likely because of the correspondence with His eternal begetting of the Son and spiration of the Spirit. The Son is, in a certain sense, the fulfillment of God's economy (Heb. 1), as throughout the Old Testament and finally in the Incarnation He was (and remains) the personal, distinct, tangible appearance of God within creation. Throughout the whole of redemption, the Spirit acts as the agent of divine power, the one who accomplishes the supernatural divine will within natural space and time. These role distinctions are consistent and ultimate in human relationship to God, but they are not themselves internal to the divine being, though they in an imperfect and finite way reflect the internal Triune relations of God. They call forth a response for human faith and practice which seeks to worship the Father through the mediation of the Son by faithful union in the Spirit, and to do the will of the Father on the ground of the work of the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Attributes of God

Because the Triune God has revealed Himself to humanity, He has demonstrated His possession of what are traditionally called many attributes. These are traditionally divided into incommunicable attributes and communicable attributes. The incommunicable attributes of God

are those for which there is no possible human analogy, which no man can either share or emulate. In contrast, the communicable attributes of God are those for which there is something of a human analogy, which man can in some way or to some degree either share or emulate. This distinction must be understood only in relation to Christ in the Incarnation. Incommunicable attributes can be seen as those divine attributes which do not apply in any way to the humanity of Christ, and communicable attributes are those which do in some way apply to the humanity of Christ. Indeed, the Incarnation alone (*sola incarnatio*) makes any of God's attributes communicable to man (John 14:6).

The chief of God's incommunicable attributes is His absolute aseity. He is caused by, dependent upon, and sustained by nothing at all (Acts 17:25). He is fully self-sufficient and self-existent. This naturally leads into transcendence. Because God is self-existent, He stands radically above and apart from all which is not, all which is contingent and created (Job 40). Nothing compares to Him, nothing is like Him, and there is an infinite qualitative distinction between God and all other beings. As the one who transcends all created reality, He is free from all the limitations of time, space, matter, and energy, which marks Him as infinite. God's aseity and transcendence also form the core of His impassibility. Being above and apart from all by nature, God cannot be acted upon or affected by anything apart from His specific will to self-move. Even God's emotional life, even when He reacts, functions by the free self-moving of God. Finally, God's absolute aseity also implies His utter simplicity as a mysterious incommunicable attribute. God, as He relies on no constituent "things" to exist, has no parts but is one, undivided, unified, personal whole. All of His attributes are fundamentally one, and His existence is identical to His essence.

God's communicable attributes, attributes which present themselves in Christ's human existence and can be shared by the power of the Spirit with mortal men, begin with (admittedly somewhat controversially) the traditional three "omni" attributes. God is omnipotent, able to do anything which is has a consistent meaning and accomplish all His will (Matt. 19:26). This all-power was in action in Christ's human ministry by the Spirit, even raising Him from the dead, and by the same Spirit poured out God's people now have access to that same power. God is omniscient, knowing perfectly all things in all times and places, even all possibilities, though His perfect self-knowledge (John 21:17). God is omnipresent, having His omnipotence and omniscience engaged in every nook and cranny of all space and time (Ps. 139:7-9).

God is also fundamentally good without any mixture of evil (Mark 10:18). He is goodness itself, defining it by His own pure existence. He is love, a self-giving and sacrificial love which characterizes all His being and act (1 John 4). God is Himself truth, the one who by speaking determines all reality (Rom. 3:4, John 17:17). He is absolutely holy, morally superior to all others, pure and set apart from creation (Isa. 6:3). Righteousness, in the fullest sense of moral rightness, faithfulness, and justice, is also His in abundance (Ps. 36:6). He never swerves from a fair and faithful devotion to His creation and covenant. Finally, all of these communicable attributes can be seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is Himself God fully translated into humanity. They climax in visibility on His cross and empty tomb, as in one singular act God displayed His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, goodness, love, holiness, and righteousness.

Creation

All of the aforementioned attributes of God apply to Him eternally and essentially, without any contingency. Yet God has also added to Himself a status, not an attribute per se but a

relationship, by exercising His omnipotent will to create the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them. Everything has been created by God *ex nihilo*, out of pure nothing (Gen. 1:1). Worked out consistently this undergirds the Creator/creature distinction and undercuts all thoughts of divine determinism (in which the processes of the universe itself are derived from the divine decree). Creation therefore has an absolutely independent order (under God's will, of course, but not under His manipulation or direct causal interaction) with an absolutely contingent existence.

Genesis records the account of this ancient act of origination in a specialized literary form. While certainly describing literal events and probably not being poetry, the construction of at least Genesis's opening sequence is didactic and symbolic rather than literal narrative. The seven-day account of creation is a temple construction narrative, recording how God carefully built the entire cosmos to become His dwelling place, with the crowning installation being man in His own image. There is no reason, therefore, to assume the seven days are intended to teach literal chronological duration, and the rational inquiry into the natural world which points to an old creation may be allowed to stand. On the other hand, the means of the creation of life, whether immediate or by an evolutionary process, is left unspecified in Scripture. The point of all this is to proclaim God as the true Creator of all and the universe as His temple filled with a variety of adornment to His glory.

Problem of Evil

Despite that a good and omnipotent God created the universe, there is presently evil filling the earth. This seems to create a tension. Why would a good God not eliminate evil if He has the power? The first and foremost response to this is that God indeed is using His omnipotent power to eliminate evil, and this has been ultimately accomplished in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Jesus is the answer to the problem of evil. If one is to press further to

ask about why God has chosen such a slow process, such radically finite and sinful creatures as present man have no epistemic grounds from which to judge the methods by which God chooses to solve evil. On the other hand, if one wishes to pry into the origins of evil, he must be cautioned. No answer is clearly given in Scripture. Nonetheless, one might suggest that as long as God created man with all of the physical and psychological capacities which make evil possible, to allow them to actually engage in evil would be a necessary part of maintaining their integrity as creatures. To force the matter otherwise would be to turn creatures into mere extensions of the divine will. In any case, evil is present, inexplicable, entirely unjustified in itself, and conquered by Christ.

Angels

God has also created, in addition to men and the animals, and probably before both, the race of angels as spiritual, immaterial creatures. They come in many kinds and ranks, but they all exist to serve God by worshiping Him, executing His will, and serving His people (Heb. 1). They seem to have a form of localized presence despite their disembodiment (Dan. 10), and they possess the ability to temporarily take on human form. Apparently one of them, called now the Devil or Satan, rebelled against God through pride, and with him many others also sinned. These are destined for judgment without possibility of salvation (Jude 6). Some may have already met their doom.

Anthropology

The crowning climax of God's creation is mankind in His own image. In the final day of constructing God's cosmic temple, He installed humans in the center to represent His name and authority. Humans are unique from all other creatures in multiple ways.

Creation of Humanity

God created the human race uniquely among all other creatures. With regard to the natural flesh (what has been called in the past man's animal nature), humanity surpasses all other creatures by degree but not by kind. God intentionally designed the human race to have sufficient intellectual, emotional, social, and moral capacities that they might be His people and image. None of these capacities are themselves sufficient for this role, but they are necessary. Thus God crafted mankind to a higher functionality than the rest of His creatures. This functionality is also binary, taking the form of two different genders with unique roles and abilities. Whether He did all this by personal, supernatural intervention or by natural processes is irrelevant because it pertains only to man's animal nature, which is not itself the center of true anthropology.

God also set apart the human race from all other creatures in kind, not merely degree, when He breathed into them and blessed them with a divine vocation (Gen. 1:28-30). Through His Spirit He created them in the image of the Incarnate Christ. He called man above and beyond the natural world of flesh to communion with Himself and through this communion to a job as image-bearer, that through human work all creation might be built up into a well-adorned temple manifesting the glory of God. This call and image-bearing role was proleptically grounded in the Incarnation of Christ (Col. 1:15).

The Image of God

Man was created in the image of God, and what this means cannot be seen more clearly in light of the truth that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). The glory of the Incarnate Christ is the glory of God in human form, humanity fully alive according to the call of God (Heb. 2). This is the image after which humanity was originally designed. The prototype of

humanity is Christ, the true Adam, and in the creation of man Adam was formed out of natural flesh into a kind of creature which could exemplify the image of God in Christ.

This locating of the image of God in Christ rules out any thought that the image of God can be located in any human particularity in itself. Neither reason, nor emotion, nor relationality, nor sociality, nor even any immaterial aspect of humanity is sufficient to constitute the image of God. Nonetheless, certainly they are prerequisites, as without them there could be no comprehensible Incarnation providing actual communion between a creature and the Creator. Ultimately, the Incarnation gathers up all of these human attributes and turns them into servants of the divine image.

The functional nature of the image of God in man is that man may project God's glory and authority into the rest of creation. God rules over men, and by making men in His image, God establishes them as instruments by which He rules the rest of creation. Through human regents, God will turn the entire creation from a basic tabernacle to a glorious and eternal temple full of His glory.

View of Human Nature

The human person has been created as a body-soul composite (Matt. 10:28). Man could be considered bipartite, but even this suggests too much divisibility. The natural man still has immaterial, soulish aspects to his existence which blur the boundaries between body and soul, and the regenerate man by the Holy Spirit is affected and filled with a new, resurrecting principle of life at every level of being, both physical and immaterial. While in a sense the body and soul can be divided through death, this leaves the human person even if in "heaven" in a radically incomplete and ambiguous existence which begs for remedy by a final resurrection (2 Cor. 5:4).

Nature of Sin

Sin is fundamentally a mysterious phenomenon but can be identified simply as anything which opposes the benevolent creative design of God. When using a more legal framing, sin is a violation of the law of God (1 Jn. 3:4), whether in the Old Testament sense of breaking the *Torah* or in the New Testament sense of breaking the law of love toward God and man. Sin pulls man away from God, even while man and (indirectly) his sinfulness are maintained in existence precisely by the gracious power of God. This puts man into a state of contradiction and inauthenticity which can only, if not treated, result in a miserable state of inconsistent inhumanity. Because the image of God which grounds human existence and nature is found in Christ and His divine glory, humans who attempt to distance themselves from God in Christ contradict their own being and thus push away from life, the image of God, and beatitude toward death, fleshliness, and wretchedness (Jer. 2:13).

Source of Sin

The origins of sin are fundamentally shrouded in obscurity. If sin indeed originated with Satan's pride, then how a pure create of God could ever think to become so is inexplicable. Nor can any accounting be made for how and why Adam and Eve in the first came to trust the word of a serpent over the God who created them, blessed them, and walked with them.

Even so, while sin's entry into the world may be forever a *surd*, its ongoing sources within a corrupted world are clear. The flesh generates natural, animal desires that become sin without the control of the Spirit (Rom. 7:14-24). The world of fleshly people in its social and political forms and structures pressure people to commit sin and instill within them sinful values and beliefs (1 Jn. 2:15-17). Wicked spiritual forces also directly instigate sinful behaviors and movements (Eph. 6:10-13).

Original Sin

Sin entered the human world when Adam and Eve broke God's command, and sin has since then spread to all people so much that they are morally malformed even from the womb (Rom. 4). Whether Adam is to be understood as a literal, physical father of all humans, an early tribal leader, or a generic, archetypal figure, the problem was same: he turned from God's call to communion through faith and instead settled for satisfying his fleshly nature. He thereby disordered human life by turning it toward bare nature rather than God, an act that poisoned all relationships whether with men, creation, or the Creator. A corrupt and corrupting social order was generated to compound the problems that human flesh was now trying to stand on its own rather than trust in grace and that demonic forces sought to destroy the young race.

The result is that Adam's posterity inherit sin by three channels. There is the human flesh they inherit by nature, not evil in itself but evil by itself when oriented toward itself rather than directed toward God. In addition, humans are morally formed by the corruption of the world in its social and political forms and structures, so that they become intrinsically oriented toward fallen fleshly ways and values beyond what their individual, abstracted natures might have been inclined to do or even capable of pursuing. Finally, Satan and his host actively use and inhabit these influences to deepen and sharpen human rebellion against God.

This all adds up to a race of people who go bad pursuing bare animal nature (both individually and socially) from their beginnings, with no hope of escape from within because of their irresistible downward (and demonic) pressure towards transient, earthly existence. They thus bear total inability to reach out to the true God in His transcendence, and even the echoed desire remaining from their creation in His image long ago produces only idolatry apart from His personal revelation (Rom. 3:10-18).

Doctrine of Christ

Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. He is all in all, the origin and goal of creation, and the Lord of lords. He is the Son of God, both in the original sense of “Messianic king” and the developed sense of God the Son. He was conceived by the Spirit, born of a virgin, lived a perfect human life, died an atoning death, rose to eternal life, and ascended to the right hand of the Father where He reigns forevermore.

Deity of Christ

Jesus is God (John 1:1). He is the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, eternally begotten of the Father (John 3:16), *homoousios* (of one being or substance) with the one God (John 1:14-18). He is equal in every way to the Father within the internal Trinitarian relations. The words and deeds of Jesus are the words and deeds of God (John 5:19). Even in His Incarnation Christ gave up no divine attributes or character, but instead voluntarily limited their use through the Holy Spirit.

Humanity of Christ

Jesus is human. The core significance of redemption lies in that God has actually become one of the destitute race for their salvation (Heb. 2:14). Jesus’ humanity is complete and unmitigated. He has become fully human, with a human body and soul (1 John 4:2). In the Incarnation Jesus’ mind, heart, consciousness, and entire psychology was and is as human as anyone else’s. This means that in Jesus’ human existence, He was not automatically different from other men. Any differences in His body, mind, or abilities resulted from the power of the Holy Spirit. (For example, Jesus’ omniscience and omnipotence in His human existence were mediated exclusively by the will and power of the Spirit, not unilateral exercises of His own divine attributes, e.g. Matt. 24:36.) In the Incarnation Jesus assumed the fullness of human nature that He might redeem that nature in its fullness from all evil distortions and experiences.

Jesus inherited from Mary a plain human nature. Some have argued that Jesus received an unfallen or perfect human nature, and others have countered that He assumed a fallen or sinful one since the unassumed is the unhealed. To the contrary, there is only one human nature common to fallen and unfallen man (otherwise there would be two, ontologically divided human races), and sin affects every human's individual nature rather than modifying human nature proper. Jesus inherited this one common nature, but by the sanctifying power of His divine holiness overcome the sin He ought to have also inherited.

Sinlessness of Jesus

Following on the previous statement, Jesus inherited the one, common human nature, not a specialized unfallen version or a fallen version. His personal nature included all the weaknesses of human flesh from which sin may easily sprout (Heb. 5:2), but not original sin itself. From conception His human existence was animated not by His flesh but by the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit He resisted the temptations resulting from natural desires and the corruptions present in the social and political structures of the world. Thus He lived a life unstained of sin while nonetheless sharing in the condition of fallen, sinful man, a fact ultimately demonstrated in His mortality (Rom. 8:3). His human nature did not possess impeccability and thus offered an ability to sin, but His divine nature is impeccable and thus prevented Jesus as a person from sinning.

Unity of Person

Jesus is one Person (*hypostasis*) who possesses two, independent, unconfused, undivided natures, one divine and one human. The divine nature does not divinize (in a substantive sense) the human, nor does the human nature humanize the divine. The unity of the two natures in the one Person is maintained by the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Neither nature is a subject; they cannot act or properly have action attributed to them. Only the person of Jesus acts, though He may do so by virtue of one nature or the other, or He may act in both. Thus "Jesus's human

nature died” or “Jesus’ divine nature created the universe” would be incorrect, but “Jesus died in His human nature” and “Jesus created the universe as God” would be true. Likewise, because Jesus is identified as God and as a man, His acts can be attributed to His one person with either a divine or a human reference. Thus “God died” and “A man created the universe” are both true, even though “Jesus died in His divine nature” or “Jesus created the universe as a human” would both be false.

Virgin Birth

Jesus was born of a virgin, which specifically means that He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit without sexual intercourse in a woman who had never once engaged in such (Matt. 1:18-24). Sexuality and human will were in fact entirely absent from this miracle. This act of God signified and effected a new creation in the midst of the old, redemption from the womb of the fallen (a fact which is twisted and denied by the doctrine of Mary’s immaculate conception). It announced that salvation is ultimately from God’s grace alone and cannot be mustered by mere human efforts.

The Work of Christ

The Person of Christ cannot rightly be understood and has not been presented to us apart from His work, His redemptive act for man (1 Tim. 3:16). The one God-man Jesus became incarnate, was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, engaged in the ministry of launching the attack of the Kingdom of God against the kingdoms of Satan and this age, died a vicarious, substitutionary death, rose to victorious and unquenchable life, ascended to a glorious throne at the right hand of the Father Almighty, and poured out His Spirit upon His people. He will one day return to usher in the completion of all He has accomplished.

Theory of the Atonement

The work of Christ in atonement is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to any one theory. Each theory is best understood as an analogy from which to grasp but a single angle of the whole mystery. However, the atonement, including the whole of Christ's work from conception to Pentecost, is best told in narrative form and can be understood through two different lenses: the narrative-historical lens, the ontological lens.

In the narrative-historical lens, when faced with the fallen state of humanity God called out a people through whom He could reestablish the way of truth, life, and right worship and so bless all the world (Gen. 12:1-3). This people, Israel, could not transcend the corruption of the flesh and the world, even though they were set apart and given many divine gifts and aids. They failed so badly that they went into exile (Acts 7:42-52). God had mercy and restored them to their land, but the exile never fully ended as God never again filled the Temple with His glory or freed His people altogether from pagan oppression. Eventually God chose to initiate a new exodus, a new return from exile, by rewriting Israel's history and destiny in a Messianic Savior. No mere fleshly Israelite could accomplish this plan, so God Himself became a Jewish man as Jesus. Jesus fulfilled the Messianic duty, and thus Israel's vocation and calling, as He disarmed the powers of sin, suffering, Satan, and death itself through forgiveness, healing, exorcism, and resurrection. He called forth a renewed Israel reconstituted around Himself (Mark 3:16-19), to be filled with the eschatological life and power He exemplified. This all climaxed in His death and resurrection, as He bore the full judgment due to Israel for their unfaithfulness on behalf of His people (Gal. 3:13), so that those who followed Him could come with Him out the other side through resurrection and the power of the Spirit. By this act He also opened the door for Gentiles to share in this redemption (Gal. 3:14), and so salvation through death and resurrection was made a reality for the whole world without distinction.

In the ontological lens, mankind by sinning blotted out the image of God (the image of the Incarnate Christ after whom mankind was patterned) and cut themselves off from the life-giving effects of the divine glory (Rom. 3:23). They were trapped in their own flesh and worldly structures, unable to transcend the earth and restore fellowship with the God of heaven (Rom. 3:10-18). So God called a people whom He formed by word and deed into a partial, fleshly image of His life and glory. This slow and painful process involved much judgment and rebellion (Hos. 8:1), for man continued to struggle against God as God drew nearer, eventually climaxing when God Himself became a man (1 Cor. 2:8). By the Incarnation, God united His glory to human being in such a way that human existence was healed and restored from the inside out by Jesus' self-consecration through the Spirit. Jesus came as a man among men to lead them to His eternal life and glory (Heb. 2), providing a sanctified and resurrected human existence in which man could participate by the Spirit (Rom. 8:11). This by design provoked more and more conflict with sinful man until they crucified Him, with the world, the flesh, and the Devil exhausting their worst upon the God-man. Yet He rose again victoriously, breaking the power of these forces (Col. 2:15) and triumphing with the glory of man reunited with God's inexhaustible life in the resurrected Christ. He brought this perfected humanity into the presence of God in the ascension so as a High Priest He could eternally offer His sanctified human life as righteous, pleasing humanity through which those who are united to Him by the Spirit might be saved (Heb. 7:24-27).

Neither lens omits traditional legal aspects of the atonement. In the narrative-historical lens, Jesus representatively experienced the judgment of God coming upon Israel, dying as the substitute for all who followed Him and providing a way of escape in His resurrection. In the ontological lens, God declared His judgment on all human sin as that sin crucified Christ in its place, and He stood as the vicarious representative of all the fallen people whose nature He

assumed. Thus His justification in the Resurrection became the justification of all who share that nature (Rom. 4:25).

Extent of the Atonement

Whether a narrative-historical or an ontological lens is used for the atonement, all men are implicated and included. Jesus died for everyone without qualification or exception (Heb. 2:9). From the narrative-historical lens, Jesus died for all because Israel in their election was defined precisely as a standard representative of natural man (Deut. 9:4-6). Israel stood before God on behalf of the sinful world, and Jesus the Messiah stood before God on behalf of sinful Israel.

Likewise, from the ontological lens, Jesus assumed the one human nature common to all (Heb. 2), and His redeeming work is thereby applicable to all who share that nature. All represented in the Incarnation are represented in the atonement, and all of the race into which He incarnated are represented in the Incarnation. All are represented and included in His death, therefore all have died (2 Cor. 5:14). All are represented and included in His resurrection, therefore all have been marked out for resurrection (John 5:28-29). All are represented and included in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, therefore all are recipients of His intercession and mediation. In the end, people who are lost will not be lost because Christ refused to atone for them or represent them, but because they deny the reality of what Christ has done for them and inexplicably cut themselves off from the life He has won for them (Heb. 2:1-3).

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit of the Father and of Christ. He is to be worshiped and glorified along with the Father and the Son, and He has been active with them since before the foundation of the world.

Person of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, who proceeds from the Father and the Son (though this should be understood as a procession from the being of the Father and the Son, not from both or either of their Persons). He is fully God, equal in glory, honor, immortality, and power to the Father and the Son. He is characterized in the economy especially by His humility, seeking to witness to the Father and the Son (or perhaps the Father through the Son) rather than to Himself. The Spirit is no mere force or presence, but is God Himself (2 Cor. 3:17), personally active in power and presence toward man.

Work of the Spirit

The Spirit has been active with the Father and the Son from the beginning. He created the world (Gen. 1:2) and blesses all creation with a variety of good gifts. In the Old Testament, He worked to empower people for various divine vocations and works (Num. 11:17), He spoke to the prophets (Num. 11:29), and in general He brought the omnipotent power of God to bear upon space, time, and matter in extraordinary ways. He worked in Israel's liturgy and cult to pull the people forward to the future fulfillment in Christ.

In Jesus, the Spirit acted with a new fullness, filling Him thoroughly and remaining upon Him rather than departing after a time (Luke 3:22, 4:1, 14). He empowered Christ's Kingdom-founding works, far surpassing the works of the prophets before Him. He so thoroughly sanctified Christ's human existence as to preserve pure faith and faithfulness to the Father, and He mediated all the divine powers to the human use of the Son by the plan and will of the Father (Matt. 12:28). Finally, He empowered the Son to obey even unto death and restored Him three days later to begin with Him the resurrection life of the new creation (Rom. 8:11). After the Ascension, Christ poured out His Spirit on His whole people.

Since Pentecost, the Spirit has performed many tasks in the life of each Christian. He works regeneration, the new birth (Titus 3:5). He unites man to Christ, and through Christ to God. He imparts the human faith (or faithfulness) of Jesus to man that man might be able to respond appropriately to God. By the Spirit believers are progressively conformed to the image of God in Christ, becoming less driven by natural flesh and more driven by the Spiritual life of Christ (Rom. 8). His power grants them spiritual gifts from Christ, gifts which variously may or may not be charismatic (1 Cor. 12:4-11). The Spirit also protects and seals Christians against all attacks so that, if through Him they hold fast to their Savior, they will be delivered from all until Christ returns (Eph. 1:13-14). In the end, He will complete the new creation work, redeeming the whole man in body and soul for eternity and installing Him in the wider redeemed cosmos, glorified and renewed in Christ.

Baptism and Filling

In the baptism of the Holy Spirit, man is immersed into the domain of the new creation (1 Cor. 12:13). This baptism must not be divorced from Christian water baptism, even if the appearances of the two just after Pentecost may have been somewhat disjointed. The baptism of the Spirit immerses a new believer into union with Christ by the Spirit or into the new creation domain of the Spirit by Christ (depending on the angle of view). The event is singular, unrepeatable, and occurs at the beginning of the Christian life.

The filling of the Spirit is a secondary work, occurring at various time, in which the Spirit takes a particularly active role in animating the life of the believer (Acts 4:31). A believer filled with the Spirit presents His members as servants of righteousness to God rather than mere fleshly desires or the world structures. This is not a permanent state, but sooner or later subsides and must be sought again and again through prayer and devotion.

Gifts of the Spirit

In pouring out His Spirit upon His Church, Christ has given many gifts to His people. Indeed, though “gifts of the Spirit” may be imagined to refer to gifts the Spirit gives, they are better understood as gifts Christ gives through His Spirit. These are for the purpose of advancing the Kingdom of God and the new creation during this age until Christ returns. Many gifts are evidently miraculous, such as the ability to speak in languages never learned, healing, or extraordinary knowledge of others’ lives. Many are more mundane though not less supernatural, including hospitality that turns a three-bedroom apartment into a homeless shelter, generosity that feeds the 5000 from a single income, or faith that moves families and churches halfway across the world (all of this is in 1 Cor. 12:8-10).

Gifts are distributed by God’s wisdom variously to His people (1 Cor. 12:4-7). They are complementary in function and to be used by members of one body to advance the Kingdom of God on the earth, both by reaching more people and reforming those already included to mirror God’s will on earth as in heaven. Christians may have multiple gifts to varying degrees, but all are meant to work together in harmony. No gift may be a source of pride, and the miraculous gifts are not allowed preference over the others. By spiritual gifts the Church witnesses to Christ and His Kingdom by both Christ’s power and Christ’s love.

The Doctrine of Salvation

In practice the chief concern of Christian doctrine is salvation. God in Jesus Christ by the Spirit has come to be a Savior, and what this means is of great import. God has created a good world to fill with His glory and a race of image-bearing people with whom to have loving communion, but the people rebelled, threw all creation off-track, and came to need some kind of restoration through a second creative act of God, a recreation. This is the subject of salvation. While salvation should always be seen as encompassing God’s work toward the entire cosmos

and to entire human race in particular, this must intersect with individual human lives at some point, and thus soteriological study can and may rightly zoom in on this smaller scale.

Objective Aspects

Salvation can in a certain sense be divided up into two aspects, the objective and the subjective. While this is not a perfect categorization, there is some legitimate meaning to it. The primary objective aspects of salvation are election, justification, forgiveness, and adoption. In an oversimplified sense, each of these is objective in the sense that it is completely accomplished outside of the individual, an act of God which changes the state of the believer but not (automatically) his subjective thought and practice.

Election means that God has chosen from before time to become man in Jesus Christ and by doing so bring humanity into communion with His Trinitarian love and life. Jesus is the electing God and elect man (Luke 9:35), and in Him, because He took the reprobation of all mankind at the cross, all mankind receives His election (1 Tim. 4:10). This is historically realized through the corporate election of Israel and the Church in Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and in Christ (Eph. 1:3). All men have been chosen, elected by God *de jure*, even those who have not (and never will) see their election realized *de facto*.

Justification means that God has declared His Son righteous in the Resurrection, vindicating Him as both innocent and the Messiah of God, and thus in Him all of the people He represents are also so vindicated as the faithful people of God (1 Tim. 3:16, Rom. 4:25). Individually, each man is justified by faith, marked out as one of God's people because of His union with the Righteous One with faith standing as the firstfruits of this union (Rom. 5:1). Justification officially establishes man in a right standing with God through Christ and His covenant.

Forgiveness means that in Christ God has cleared Israel (Matt. 26:28) and through Israel the world (Luke 24:47) of all its sins. The sin of the world has been propitiated and expiated as it was crucified on the cross in Jesus' body (1 Jn. 2:2). This must not be seen in any pagan way as a mere man appeasing the wrath of a deity, but as the self-sacrificial, internal act by which God personally forgives sinners, absorbing the cost into Himself to remove the relational obstacle between man and God. From the narrative-historical vantage point, forgiveness comes as God counts the death of the faithful Messiah representing His people as sufficient fulfillment of the curses of Torah on idolatry, thus freeing Him to once again act in blessing and deliverance toward His people (Gal. 3:10-13).

Adoption means that God has taken humans who were not naturally His heirs and made them His heirs. From the ontological lens, this means that through the Incarnation God has made His Son a brother of lost humanity that by their brotherhood with the Son of God they might also become sons of God, entering by grace into the relationship Jesus has by nature (Heb. 2:10-14). Thus through Christ the human race is made into God's children, a reality into which they individually enter through personal union with Christ (John 1:12-13). From the narrative-historical lens, this means that the covenant people God has called out and delivered (in the sense of birth) have now grown up in their Messiah, finally able to be adopted and installed as the official heir (Gal. 3:19-4:7). Thus through Christ the people of God now have access to the rights and possessions of the Father.

Subjective Aspects

There are also subjective aspects of salvation which pertain exclusively to the realization of salvation in the individual believer. Aspects which may be counted under this category (though again imprecisely) are regeneration, calling, and conversion. The three are deeply interrelated and must be treated closely together.

Regeneration is the act of God by which man becomes part of the new creation. In fact, regeneration can be seen to encompass the whole act of new creation effectively accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection, in which case it would begin to cross the line into objective territory (Matt. 19:28). Since the term is associated (usually considered synonymous) with the new birth, the usual focus is on the *beginning* stage of new creation life, though even the end and final resurrection should be included. Regeneration should be associated and perhaps identified with the baptism of the Spirit (Titus 3:5). Regeneration places man in the eternal life of the age to come, the healed domain of Christ and His Spirit. Many say regeneration is the act by which God imparts faith, but in Scripture the two acts are not connected, and faith most likely precedes regeneration.

Calling refers to the act by which God through His Spirit presents Christ to the sinner and says to Him, "Follow me." God speaks personally and calls man to faith and repentance through the preaching of the Gospel. This call is irresistible *de jure* but turns out to be resistible *de facto* as people inexplicably and impossibly deny the same Word of God which created them and sustains them in existence. Yet for those who do not resist but are caught up in the call and united to Christ's vicarious faith and repentance, the call actually brings forth conversion (2 Tim. 1:8-9).

Conversion is the event in which one responds to God's call with faith and repentance. God calls, and man responds. He assents to the reality of Jesus who calls Him, places trust in Him, and decides to turn away from his former way of life (Mark 1:15). Even this, however, would be impossible for natural man, and the faith and repentance with which a man may turn to God was originally created in the faith and sin-resistance of Jesus Himself in human flesh. By the Spirit's call, the new believer believes through Jesus' own faith in the Father (Gal. 2:20 KJV).

Sanctification

Sanctification can refer either to the singular consecration of human nature and existence in Jesus Christ as He reunited humanity with the glory and life of God (Heb. 10:10) or (more commonly) to the ongoing process by which the believer is conformed more and more to the glory of God in Jesus Christ, the image of the Son (1 Thess. 5:23). This is distinct from the singular verdict of justification, even though a sanctified life is its own vindication in a sense. In sanctification the Spirit draws the believer ever nearer to Christ, filling him more fully with Jesus' divine-human life and glory. This process slowly and painfully (for it must wrestle with sinful flesh) brings about many virtues and climaxes in the completion of sanctification in the resurrection. In a certain sense, sanctification can be classified as a subset of the wider meaning of regeneration.

Perseverance

All who are in Christ by the Spirit have unlimited and unshakeable access to His eternal life (John 10:28). No dangers, no kind of sin, no forces internal or external can snuff out this life. The power of the Spirit by which the believer participates in Christ's own endurance through even the Cross is sufficient to enable all believers to endure to the end and be saved. Nonetheless, by some inexplicable mystery (akin to the *surd* by which men reject God's calling and election in the first), there do seem to be those who cease to have faith, who do not cease to grieve the Spirit, and who thus are pruned by the Father from union with Christ (John 15). This is a frightening possibility, which by all accounts ought not even be possible, but one of which believers need have no fear if they simply cling in faith to Jesus as their sole hope of salvation. While this position is controversial, it requires little or no hermeneutic leaps and follows naturally from fact that salvation is rightly possessed only by Christ, and believers only participate by union with Him through faith.

The Doctrine of the Church

The Church is called Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:27). It is the community of people who have been called out of this age into the age to come and responded in faith. There is only one Church, consisting of all the baptized in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Over it Christ reigns and through it He advances His saving will in the present evil age. Outside the Church there is no evident possibility of salvation.

The Nature of the Church

The Church is a covenant community (Israel reborn and redefined, in fact, see John 3) determined by faith-relationship to Jesus Christ, its elect head (Eph. 1:3). By union with the resurrected and ascended Christ the Church is marked out as the sphere of the Spirit's new creation power in the midst of the old creation. Those who are united to Christ by baptism (Rom. 6:3-4) are its members, and they receive today the bread for tomorrow as the Spirit eschatologically grounds their reality through the Lord's word and Supper (1 Cor. 10:17). The Church stands both as the sign and the firstfruits of the age to come during this evil age, its true eschatological being hidden with Christ in heaven.

The Function of the Church

In this age the primary function of the Church is to act as Christ's body, which means to carry on His work in this world during His bodily absence (Matt. 28:19-20). The Church is called both to be a witness to the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Christ, which in one sense will remain future until the eschaton, and to be an anticipatory manifestation of the Kingdom, actively bringing about its work and ends. This is a continuation of the ministry of Christ, now designed to reach all people before He returns to continue His Messianic work and judge the world. This two-fold ministry corresponds broadly to two kinds of Church work: the work of evangelism and missions, and the work of charitable love and healing. This latter work applies

especially within the Church as believers minister to each other with their gifts. Chief among these ministries are Word and Sacrament.

The Government of the Church

Contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence in Scripture for one, singular form of church government in the days of the New Testament. There do seem to have been basically two and a half official roles: elders (or pastors, bishops, overseers), including a head or chief elder, and deacons. The elders held positions of teaching, preaching, and leadership (1 Tim. 5:17, Titus 1:9) while the deacons held positions of service and ministry coordination (1 Tim. 3:10-13). The details beyond this may well have varied. Whether the Apostles intended any kind of hierarchical structure to the local church or to the churches together is far from clear, the matter being complicated by their unique catholic authority. Most likely only the elders were paid. Eldership also seems to have been limited to men (1 Tim. 2:12), though whether the diaconate was also thus limited remains unclear. Scripture also does not explain how much of the visible polity in the New Testament is normative and how much is simply descriptive. Truly, though, God will be pleased however His churches work these issues out if they seek to be faithful to Scripture and fulfill the vocation of the Church.

The Sacraments of the Church

Jesus instituted two sacraments (or ordinances) to define the character and worship of His Church until He returns. These include baptism and Communion (or the Eucharist or Lord's Supper). Each serves a different function for the people of God.

Baptism is the one-time sacrament of union with Christ (Gal. 3:27). When one believes in Jesus, he is in a certain sense saved and belongs to Christ, yet while all who believe will be raised on the last day, only those who are baptized will taste of the age to come by regeneration in the present (Titus 3:5, John 3:5). Water baptism is to be performed by immersing the new

believer (or the child of one) into water (though sprinkling or pouring are acceptable alternatives, if less than ideal) in the confessed name of the true God revealed in Christ. In this act, one is fully united through faith by the Spirit with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4). He is baptized of the Spirit and born again into the domain of the new creation (1 Pet. 1:3, cf. 3:21), becoming a member of the body of Christ. Even infants are to be included because they belong to the socio-relational context of the new creation community rather than that of the world. This last claim is particularly controversial but follows with the way Scripture generally treats issues of family, community, corporate spiritual life, and instructions which assume the inclusion of children in the covenant community (Eph. 6:1-4).

The Lord's Supper the ongoing sacrament of union with Christ. In the Supper a local body comes together to take bread and wine (preferably not grape juice if at all possible) that they might recall and reorient themselves toward the atoning work of Christ as their ongoing source of life (1 Cor. 11:23-26). It can be called a sacrifice in two ways, namely that it is an offering of thanksgiving to God (thus the name Eucharist) and that it intersects by the Spirit through the eternal mediation of Christ with His once-for-all act self-sacrifice for mankind before the Father, again and again pulling the Church back in time to the Cross where it finds life. Christ is truly and really present in the Supper, offering to His body and blood for nourishment by faith (1 Cor. 10:16, John 6:51), yet this presence is not physical and local but is the Spirit-mediated presence of the exalted, ascended Christ who remains in heaven. This presence of the Church's single Savior binds the whole body together as one, and Communion practice should reflect this constituting reality (1 Cor. 10:17).

The Doctrine of the Last Things

The eschatological question is short but deep: what happens when eternity intersects with time? This has happened in Christ, but was awkwardly suspended by His ascension. Today His

Church awaits His return and the true resumption of the last days, ending with Him becoming all and in all.

Death

Death could be seen as an eschatological shortcut. All who die are confronted with eternity—their temporal lives coming to an end—and so come face to face with the eternal God. In death the body and soul, although fundamentally one, are torn asunder and beg for reunion (2 Cor. 5:2-4). God deals with the soul in this meantime. He gives a kind of preliminary judgment which will be completed only at the last day, and each person will receive a foretaste of their final reward. Some question whether unbelievers may have a chance to repent between death and final judgment. This may or may not be the case; Scripture does not clearly answer.

Intermediate State

The intermediate state refers to the existence of human souls in between death and the resurrection of final judgment. During this time men possess no bodies or brains (for those are in the grave), thus they lack senses or the kind of consciousness to which living humans are accustomed. Certainly it is a radically different and incomplete state of existence, a state which calls out for healing in the resurrection. Nonetheless, even in this stunted state the righteous now, through Christ, experience the bliss of God's personal presence, even the beatific vision (Luke 23:43, Phil. 1:23). Contrary to popular belief, though, this state involves nothing physical at all, including mansions and streets of gold. The intermediate state of the wicked is far less clear, though suffering is certainly involved.

Second Coming

Jesus has promised to return to this earth (it is His home with respect to His humanity, after all), and when He comes He will judge the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1). He will return physically with glory and power, defeating all of His enemies (Rev. 19:11-21). All people will be

raised from the dead, some to everlasting life and glory by union with Christ, and some to everlasting shame and decay apart from Christ (John 5:29). The whole of creation will die in flame (2 Pet. 3:21), only for Jesus to resurrect and renew it by the power of the Spirit forevermore (Rom. 8:19-21). There have also been and will continue to be smaller “comings” of Christ, times in which Jesus executes His judging authority in and through temporal, historical events. These are all bound up as one eschatological movement with His actual Second Coming, with certain moments like the falls of Jerusalem (Luke 21:5-24) and of Rome (Rev. 18) being especially significant.

Millennial View

So far the Millennial Reign of Christ has been going on for roughly 2000 years and may continue for many more. The term for this is (regrettably) amillennialism. The Millennium of Revelation 20 refers to the present reign of the saints, particularly the martyrs, in heaven with Christ. Satan is already bound, for he is the strong man bound by Christ in His earthly ministry (Mark 3:23-27). The only condition for Jesus’ return is the spread of the Gospel to all peoples (Matt. 24:14), which God may count as finished at any time by now.

Heaven

The term “heaven” is often used sloppily, but a hard distinction must be made between the present intermediate state of bliss in Christ’s presence and the new creation world of the resurrection. One exists already but will not remain, and one does not yet exist but will be eternal. “Heaven” per se is simply the invisible but created domain of God and His angels (Rev. 4-5), and this realm will be united with earth when Christ returns just as man has been united to God in Christ (Rev. 21). In this state, the physical cosmos will continue to exist, but will die a fiery death of purification before being raised and restored in the power of Jesus’ resurrection. There redeemed humanity will dwell for eternity.

Hell

“Hell” is also used sloppily, but in this case even the reality is obscure. Hell can describe the ethereal torments of the unbelieving dead today in their disembodied state (somewhat depicted in Luke 16:19-21), but also refers to the lake of fire after the resurrection of the dead (Rev. 20:14-15). What that literally will be like is not at all clear, but in any case the doom of unbelievers both now and in eternity will be deep and deadly. Having cut themselves off from the source of life, beatitude, and true humanity, they will be reduced to decay, misery, and inhumanity. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth as they seal for themselves an eternal paradox: existence in alienation from the God who grounds existence itself.