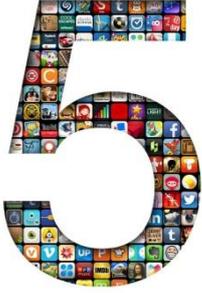


# Five Doctrines You Can't Live Without



**Allan Coutts**



# Introduction

## Exiled

I turn on the television, at the end of a busy week, in search of a bit of undemanding viewing to help me unwind. Perhaps the News, a late-night talk show, a stand-up comedian, or even an award-winning natural history film, is on. Without warning deeply-held beliefs, on which I have built my life for years, are being aggressively denounced, mercilessly sent up or simply assumed to be absurd. Now I don't want to appear over-sensitive, bigoted or to be denying free speech. I realise our faith has to be robust enough to stand up to argument and that it does us all good to laugh at ourselves now and then. But I *was* only looking for a little mindless relaxation before bedtime after all!

This is a small, unimportant, example of an awareness that has been growing in me over the years and can be expressed in the following questions. How does it feel to have life-shaping faith in God in a society that no longer shares your belief and is rapidly moving from indifference to hostility? What is it like to have deeply-held Christian convictions (or indeed, Muslim or Jewish ones) in a culture that is beginning to regard all religion as politically dangerous, emotionally pathological, intellectually indefensible and morally suspect? What happens to a young believer's self-image when all the attractive and articulate 'icons' of their society adopt a fashionable atheism or make 'religion' a target for easy satire?

I believe all this affects many of us more than we realise because its effects are subtle and largely unconscious. One dangerous possibility is that we may begin to feel like outsiders or refugees in our own country. There is the same uncomfortable feeling of being out of tune with some of the major assumptions of the culture while still trying to make your home in it. Alienation, disaffection and anger can result, as they sometimes do when young British Muslims become radicalised and join Jihadist groups. Or it can be a more subtle process of attrition leading to withdrawal, weariness and keeping your head down – the sort of 'ghettoization' which is the more frequent response of Christians in 21st century Britain.

The feeling of isolation can be a bit like that of Elijah who (wrongly) believed he was the only one of his generation who had remained faithful to God. There is also a sense of increased watchfulness; you can never completely relax, not knowing where the next challenge to your faith is going to come from. All this can compound an already stressful life in our fast-paced, information-rich society and contribute to a weariness exemplified by Elijah when he sat under a broom tree and prayed, *'I've had enough, Lord; take my life.'* (1 Kings 19:5). Reassuringly God's response was less drastic, and more practical, providing him with sleep and food instead!

Israel's exile in Babylon, in the sixth century BC, also works as an analogy. Overnight they were transplanted into a different culture in which their status was somewhere between slaves and tolerated aliens. Faith in Yahweh, which they'd taken for granted all their lives, was now a suspect belief. The same feelings of disorientation and alienation can be experienced by people of faith living in modern, secularised societies. The fact that our outward circumstances are nothing like as dramatic as those of the Babylonian exiles (or Elijah) does not remove the pain of being marginalised and ignored, regarded as out of touch and anachronistic. In short, we can begin to feel like exiles in our own native land!

But it doesn't have to be like that. Elijah quickly recovered from his 'tantrum' and, curiously, God's people appear to have thrived in exile. In a moment of unreasoning grief they might have wanted to dash Babylonian babies against rocks; but it seems they quickly got over it! They may have sat down and wept beside the rivers of Babylon on day one; but before long they were back on their feet and getting on with life. These poignant images, of course, come from Psalm 137 which expresses the Jews' first, raw response to exile, not their settled mood. For all we know, once they'd had a think about it, they may even have taken their harps down from the poplar trees and begun singing the Lord's song in a foreign land!

Some may want to quote this Psalm as proof that the Bible encourages infanticide. Come off it! This is the poetry of lament. It's the kind of thing you say when half out of your mind with grief and shock, not a considered, condoned opinion. Later the Israelites were encouraged to settle down and pray for the city of Babylon because, *'if it prospers, you too will prosper'* (Jeremiah 29:7). Indeed, it seems that most of them achieved a reasonable standard of living and God's favour took some, such as Daniel and Nehemiah, to positions of trust and influence before kings. So there must be *'hope and a future'* for us 'aliens at home' too! But let's take a moment to examine one symptom of our 'exile' more closely.

## **Doubt attack**

Living for a long time in a particular climate affects you in ways you scarcely realise. Here in Britain we don't notice that we are starved of sunlight, especially in the winter months, until we take a holiday in the Mediterranean and suddenly find ourselves bursting with energy and joie de vivre! Nor do we fully realise how well-fed we are until we visit a developing economy. The environment you live in, and the staple diet that goes with it, is one of the factors that determine your appearance, proneness to certain diseases, and even life expectancy.

Most of us have spent our whole lives in a society where our belief system is a minority viewpoint. In the last five years or so, I have become even more painfully aware that the Christian faith is now firmly at the margins and all but ignored in public debate. This is not the whole picture, of course. The rise of Islam means that 'faith' is more hotly discussed and defended than ever. It is also true that new spiritual movements and expressions of church have emerged in the last 40 years or so, embodying great hope for the future. But orthodox, mainstream Christianity has clearly reduced its 'share' in the public marketplace of ideas, having less influence in education, the media, arts and politics than for centuries.

Living in such a climate I have to admit to occasionally experiencing something slightly like a panic attack: sudden, brief but painful, moments of doubt. And I find myself in good company; Elijah, King David, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many other Biblical heroes appear to have had similar moments. It isn't so much God that I doubt, as my own psychology. What if the majority (let's call them 'easy atheists' <sup>1</sup>) are right after all? What if I've just been kidding myself all along? Maybe the whole edifice of my spiritual life has been a clever self-delusion, unconsciously created, to avoid facing the bleak reality that we are tiny specks of nothing-in-particular in a vast, indifferent universe? Even more worryingly, what if I have spent my adult life propagating, and seeking to strengthen, this harmful delusion in others?

Could it be that the commitment and sacrifices I have encouraged them to make are, in reality, pointless wastes of time and energy?

I know just enough popular psychology to know that this is one reasonable interpretation of Christian life and ministry. It is theoretically possible that our faith *is* a product of our unconscious minds, aided and abetted by the Christian community, to meet a deep need for some order and meaning in life beyond simply, *'it is what it is'*. (I don't intend to enter this debate now but, if I did, we might ask: *why* do humans have this persistent need to see ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves and as having significance beyond the here and now? I'm sure an evolutionary anthropologist would be able to come up with a very plausible explanation but we might want to throw in another hypothesis: that we were created that way. That God has, *'set eternity in the hearts of men'*, as Ecclesiastes 3:11 says!)

Anyhow, I am confessing to these brief 'doubt attacks' (embarrassing for an ordained Anglican clergyman of 30 years' standing, not to mention a 'card-carrying' evangelical and charismatic!) for two reasons. Firstly because I feel sure there must be others who share this experience but may not dare admit it in church, where such a confession may well be interpreted as a sign of weakness or lack of faith. But also, because I believe that this particular form of doubt is a direct consequence of living in the cultural context I have described and would not even occur to us if we lived in a society where the church was stronger and the majority of the population were Christian.

However, I am also glad to say that these 'attacks' usually don't last long! Thankfully, I can recall enough 'hard-to-explain-away' experiences of God to swiftly call my questions into question. I have also developed a mental framework over the years that assures me ('easy atheism' notwithstanding) that Christian faith does make a lot of sense. In fact, that is the driving conviction behind these *five doctrines you can't live without*: that a Biblical worldview still makes the best sense of reality as we humans experience it and, when I stop to think about it, still satisfies me better than any of the alternatives on offer.

## **This I call to mind**

Let's briefly consider how some Biblical writers dealt with their own 'doubt attacks' and what we can learn from it. Firstly, the author of Psalm 73 becomes grieved and embittered with envy at the seemingly easy lives of people who forget, or do not even believe in, God. He is just about to blurt out, in his pain and confusion, that dedication to the Almighty gets you nowhere in this world, and thereby destroy the faith of those who look up to him as a spiritual guide. But then a surprising change of tone occurs.

*If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.  
When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply  
till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.  
(Psalm 73:15-17)*

He enters the sanctuary of God. Suddenly memories of God's nearness come rushing in to displace his sense of injustice at the short-lived prosperity of the faithless. He sees how fragile and superficial their lives really are. A simple action (entering God's house)

completely changes his perspective. I am convinced that our answers to equally painful questions will not ultimately come from sermons or books (helpful as they are) but from being in God's Presence – often represented by His 'house' in the Psalms. David's words in Psalm 27:4, for instance, have been my prayer for years:

*One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.*

There is another striking example of a 'doubt attack' in Isaiah 49:4, part of the section of Isaiah dealing with the Babylonian exile, where the 'Servant of the Lord' makes the blunt statement:

*I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.*

And, later in the chapter, Zion chips in:

*The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me. (Isaiah 49:14)*

Whether we are bold enough to express them or not, these thoughts must occasionally have crept up on many faithful Christian workers. Maybe all my efforts have been a waste of energy based on a misunderstanding of God's will, or even a misplaced belief that God exists at all? At the very least, I have to face the fact that I have spent most of my life selling something not many people seem to want. But God responds, in Isaiah 49, with a torrent of reassurance that he can never forget us, that his purposes are even greater than we imagine, and that his people's names are even engraved on his hands. It seems as if voicing these doubts, which in other circumstances would be inexcusably ungrateful, is here a legitimate expression of pain, eliciting an amazingly gracious response from God our Father. Could it be that in moments of extreme discouragement such honesty is all God requires?

Finally, in the book of Lamentations, another Old Testament writer, possibly Jeremiah the prophet, expresses the Babylonian exiles' bitter feelings of loneliness and loss. Into the midst of all this desolation and despair comes a sudden shaft of light – and the only verses of Lamentations most of us can remember!

*I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.  
(Lamentations 3:19-23)*

Again a simple act, calling to mind God's goodness and love, brings a dramatic mood-shift. I quote these three examples (which could be multiplied throughout Christian history) to show that others have walked through this valley of self-doubting before us, often as a result of adversity or attrition from the society around them, and have come out the other side!

The five chapters that follow are part of my own response to the momentary doubt attacks which can go along with being a Christian in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. They contain some of the core beliefs I *call to mind* when assailed by these distressing thoughts. While I support the right of atheist friends to challenge our assumptions, I hope I can also put forward one or two ideas which may challenge theirs! What follows is a purely personal ‘apologia’ or ‘credo’ and makes no claim to originality or authority. I am not a professional theologian and, though I have read a fair bit in a lifetime of seeking to know and follow Jesus, I have not made a particular study of other books covering similar ground. This was partly deliberate, for fear that discovering how much better others have done the job would discourage me from attempting it! It also follows that no one else is to blame for any foolish errors I may have made.

Although I have rewritten the *‘Five Doctrines you can’t live without’* to read a bit more like prose, they were originally sermons, written for a particular group of people at a particular time. It will immediately be apparent that the result is nothing approaching an exhaustive theological treatment of these five classic doctrines, merely some personal reflections on them, drawing out a few points which it seemed to me (and I hope the Holy Spirit!) would be helpful to the hearers at the time. Paul’s great opening prayer in Ephesians 1, brilliantly reinterpreted by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, was never far from my mind in this series of talks and I recommend you read and meditate on that text before reading any further.

I was fortunate to have a mentor in early life who had many memorable sayings. One of these was *‘doubt your doubts and believe your believing’*. What follows is nothing as grand as a systematic theology, a Christian apologetic for our time (or any other!), or even another basic discipleship course. It is simply a series of sermons, preached in my own church, developing some of the things I *call to mind* when assailed by the thought *‘what if I’ve been kidding myself all along’*. They are my way of calling doubt into doubt, questioning the questions, and making the easy unbelief of our culture a little harder to believe in.

## **Glorious exiles!**

We compared all this to Old Testament Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon. Of course that was not an original idea. The same thought occurred to several New Testament writers. In fact, the idea that Christians are strangers, aliens and foreigners in this world is deeply embedded in New Testament thinking. It was Jesus himself who prayed:

*...not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. (John 17:15-16)*

The epistle to the Hebrews seeks to strengthen and encourage early Christians with the example, among other heroes of faith, of Abraham and Sarah:

*By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country... They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. (Hebrews 11:9 & 13)*

The Apostle Peter addresses his audience in similar language,

*To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia... Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 1:1 & 2:11)*

Interestingly, both these epistles were probably addressed to people who felt doubly displaced; firstly as members of the Jewish Diaspora – Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire – and then as followers of Jesus the Messiah.

However, as we have seen, the Babylonian Exile turned out to be good for God's People. So was the early Christians' experience of being 'foreigners and exiles' in the pagan culture of the first century Roman Empire. Pressure, and even persecution, contributed positively to the growth of the early church. Uncomfortable though it may be, living in a 'neo-pagan' society may just be good for us too. As with every challenge in life, it depends whether we respond positively or negatively to it. I hope what follows will encourage you (and me!) to rise courageously to the challenge we face, rather than battering down the hatches and seeking to weather the storm until we get to glory!

We find the 'doubt attacks' that happen as a result of sustained exposure to hostile cultural and spiritual environments painful because we are looking into a void, examining the logical possibility that we've been fooling ourselves all along and that atheism might just be right after all. A healthy faith should be robust enough to admit the existence of this void, but should not spend too much time staring down into it!

## **A new Protestantism**

We may not feel at all heroic, or to be standing at a crux of history, but this remains our moment to be alive. Could it be that what we are called to do is of great value to God: to continue to believe, and declare that faith, in the face of the attrition of current cultural and intellectual norms? We have no idea how powerful it is when, having felt the full force of the intellectual, moral and psychological objections to Christianity, we politely beg to disagree with the 'easy atheism' of our day and say: "I hear everything you say, but I happen to believe there is a different explanation: There is a God, and he is a good Father! He is still ultimately in charge of the universe (in spite of everything humanity and the powers of darkness may have done) and he plans to put everything right through Jesus!"

Perhaps we are being called to a 'new Protestantism' – not protesting against fellow Christians this time (however misguided we may believe them to be) but against the dumb hopelessness of a godless universe. There is great power in a simple confession of faith when it comes from the lips of people who feel all the same pressure to conform to fashionable atheism as our peers, but still '*know who we believe*' (see 2 Timothy 1:12).

In particular, let's stand before our contemporaries, resisting our deep human need to fit in with the view of the majority, and make a loving but firm declaration of God's goodness such as this:

*If we could explore the vast, uncharted wilderness<sup>2</sup> of God, and map the baffling complexity (and even more baffling simplicity) of the divine nature, and discover more than the fraction of His being we currently understand (or think we understand), we would certainly make countless undreamt-of discoveries and encounter many delightful surprises, but we would not find any darkness, unkindness, injustice or evil; nor would there be any smallness, meanness, manipulation or abuse. We would simply uncover layer upon layer of love and infinite expanses of goodness.*

## **Notes**

1. Or even, 'lazy atheists' because it takes little thought or effort to assume atheism in our cultural climate.
2. 'Wilderness' in this context does not have any negative connotation, but simply denotes a wild and beautiful area unvisited, and therefore unspoilt, by human beings.



# **Doctrine One: Creation**

## The view from above

*How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. (Ephesians 1:3-6, The Message)*

Over 30 years ago, when we were at Theological College, one of my fellow students asked if he could read one of my essays. I don't think he intended to crib it! He was genuinely interested in what I thought. When he gave it back he simply commented, "*it breathes worship*". Maybe he couldn't think of anything else to say but I took it as a compliment. All good theology is an act of worship and the first chapter of Ephesians is really one long prayer – or rather two prayers: one of praise and thanksgiving and one of petition and intercession. For some reason I can't explain, my friend's comment seemed to take on greater significance when I heard, some years later, that he had been killed in a plane crash. *True theology breathes worship*. Ephesians certainly does and I hope this series of sermons will too. Tom Wright, one of our finest biblical theologians and writers, comments on this passage:

*As we read Ephesians today, to be strengthened and encouraged as Christians for the new tasks that lie ahead, we should remember that all genuine Christian life and action flows out of worship. True worship of the true God cannot help telling and retelling, with joy and amazement, the story of what this God has done in Jesus the Messiah. Enjoy the view. You won't get a better one.*<sup>1</sup>

So Paul begins with the view from above:

*How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to **the high places** of blessing in him.*

In spite of the occasional tragedies, I love flying. I like everything about it. I enjoy the feeling of acceleration as the plane races along the runway for take-off. I love the moment you realise you are no longer in contact with solid ground and the exhilaration as you punch through the typical British layer of cloud into clear blue sky and bright sunshine. I like the meals, the inflight entertainment... I even get a buzz from waiting at the airport for my flight to board! But the best thing of all is when the atmosphere is completely clear from 30,000 feet to the ground (I always choose a window seat, not over the wing) and you can see whole sections of the globe spread out below you and the curvature of the earth beyond.

I was flying back into London once and for some reason (probably because we were in a queue to land) we had not started our descent as we crossed the English Channel. The whole of my native county, Kent, stretched out below me. My first rather stupid thought was: *Oh, so the maps **are** right then!* You could see right round the Kent coastline with the

Thames Estuary and much of Greater London to the north. It was an amazing opportunity to view a familiar landscape from high above. That's what Paul does in Ephesians 1 and what I hope we can do in a small way in these sermons – take the high view.

There are several advantages of having a view from above. First you get the context; you can see the whole plan. I already knew Kent pretty well, having spent the first 18 years of my life there, but now I could see how it all fits together and one part relates to another. From above you get the big picture, the long view. In these five talks I hope we can take in the whole sweep of God's plan, from beginning to end, so that we can see our lives (and play our part) in that bigger context. Commenting on this chapter again, Tom Wright says,

*Only by understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that's going on in our own smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives.*<sup>2</sup>

The second advantage of the view from above is that it puts things in proportion. My aerial vantage point on that day left me in absolutely no doubt that London is a very big place, but my small Kentish home town was not even distinguishable to the naked eye! So much that we 'stress' about is simply not that important in the big scheme of things. Viewed from *the high places of blessing in Christ*, we can see what really matters... and what doesn't. It puts things in the right perspective.

## Creation

So Paul brings us neatly to the first of *five doctrines you can't live without*.

*Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love... Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ.* (Ephesians 1:4-6, The Message)

No it isn't the beginning of Star Wars – although the popularity of that series of films, and others like them, does point to a God-given appetite in all of us for the epic, the big picture. Here Paul is lifting the curtain on a far grander drama. Long ago God laid earth's foundations: the Bible makes it absolutely clear that God is Creator of everything that is... except for himself.

Let's get the difficult bit out of the way straightaway. Is the *Doctrine of Creation* the same thing as *Creationism*? I happen to think that reading the first few chapters of Genesis as if they were a modern history or science book is a mistake. It just isn't that kind of literature. Does that mean it isn't true? Not at all. There are different kinds of truth: poetic, symbolic, allegorical etc. If you, like me, are a lover of C.S. Lewis' Narnia books, does the fact that Narnia isn't a real place detract from the deep truth contained in those stories? Of course not. It may not be the exact kind of truth we would look for in a science or history lesson, but it would make perfect sense to a literature class. Our society may unconsciously place a higher value on scientific truth than literary or aesthetic truth, but that is a very recent obsession. I have no wish to upset anyone, but in my view the battles that rage over Creation are a tragic waste of time and energy based on a wrong understanding of Genesis.

I feel compelled to take a position on this issue (in spite of a natural inclination to skate round it and avoid unnecessary offence!) because I believe it puts a needless stumbling block in some people's way. I discovered only recently that a close member of my family, who grew up in church but is not currently practicing their faith, was put off partly over this issue. They were studying natural sciences at University and fell in with a group of Christians who insisted on a very literal interpretation of Genesis, which they found impossible to reconcile with their studies. They ended up concluding, *'if that's what this (Christianity) is all about, I'm not sure I want to be a part of it'*. That is so sad. It is absolutely possible to believe in Creation, without necessarily taking a narrow *Creationist* line.

But let me add two caveats. Firstly, I *could* be wrong. If I 'get to heaven' and discover that the world *was* made in 6, 24 hour periods, 6000 years ago, I will simply have to look very silly and admit I was wrong! More importantly, there are members of the body of Christ whom I love, respect and consider far more advanced in the Kingdom than me, who *are* Creationists. I have the deepest respect and admiration for them, but I happen to think they are wrong on this particular subject. So if you take a different view of Creation from me, fine. I have no desire to fight over it. On the other hand, if you try to deny the *truth* of Creation (as opposed to *Creationism*) I will fight you! Let me be clear: I love Genesis and have a 'high' Doctrine of Creation. It's an irreducible part of the Christian story – in fact it's *a doctrine you can't live without!* So what does this doctrine affirm?

1) **We live in God's universe.** Everything in heaven and earth owes its existence, origin and meaning to God and not just to God, but to the Son of God as well. He was there with God at the beginning, thoroughly involved in Creation, and everything has its being in, from, by, with, through and for him. There is a 'prepositional relationship' between Creation and Christ! Colossians, which is in a sense the companion letter to Ephesians, says of Christ:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)*

2) **Creation is good.**

*God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)*

This gives us an important point of contact with the 'Green' Movement. I found visiting Eden Project in Cornwall a moving and inspiring experience on many levels. The whole place is a celebration of the natural world and the enthusiasts who got it off the ground are 'evangelical' about respecting and caring for it. We should be too. We can stand alongside the 'Greens' and the 'New Agers' in reverence for the sacredness of God's Creation.

3) **Creation speaks.** What puzzles me, however, is that so many people can have a sincere love for Creation, but appear not to see the Creator revealed in it. Doesn't the amazing intricacy and order of the natural universe, from the 'macro' level of astrophysics to the 'micro' level of quantum mechanics, scream at us to worship its Designer? I love walking in the 'great outdoors' and sometimes, when immersed in scenery that is so beautiful it *hurts*

(if you know what I mean), I wonder: *how could anyone see all this and not recognise the hand of God in it?* That may not be scientific or philosophical ‘proof’ for God’s existence, but surely it makes a huge appeal to the human heart? Even more profoundly than music and art, the natural world speaks to something deeper within us than rational thought or language. Our reason may be able to argue away the Artist behind the glorious sunset, but it’s much harder to ignore the tug in our souls. In his song ‘*Creation Calls*’, Canadian worship leader Brian Doerksen stands looking out over the ocean, listening to the roar of the wind and waves, and asks:

*How can I say there is no God, when all around creation calls?*<sup>3</sup>

Paul is a bit blunter in Romans 1:20:

*Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

4) **Humanity is at the centre of Creation.** This is where we diverge from the eco movement. As well as being Christ-centred, creation is also *anthropocentric*. Human beings are the pinnacle of everything God made and we stand in a unique relationship to him and to the rest of Creation:

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* (Genesis 1:27)

The Eden Project and the Green Movement stress the continuity between us and the rest of creation: we are all part of a far bigger eco-system. That’s true, but it’s not the whole truth. Humanity is different from the rest of creation because we alone are made in the image of God. Anthropologists in Ethiopia recently dug up the jaw bone of what they believe to be a 2.8 million year-old human ancestor. Leaving aside whether they are right, I was fascinated by this comment by Professor Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum:

*These new studies leave us with an even more complex picture of early humans than we thought, and they challenge us to consider the very definition of what it is to be human. Are we defined by our small teeth and jaws, our large brain, our long legs, tool-making, or some combination of these traits?*<sup>4</sup>

The answer is *No!* What defines us as human is not any of those things, but the fact that we bear the image and likeness of God. That has many implications but, to conclude, let’s consider three which reveal both the ‘triumph’ and the ‘tragedy’ of the human race and propel us into the other four doctrines we can’t live without.

5) Firstly, **you are amazing!** That is not flattery, it’s true. You carry the image of Almighty God. Not primarily in the sense of a physical likeness, although the human body is extraordinary, but in the totality and essence of what you are. People often write off the Old Testament as primitive and barbaric, full of hatred and violence. I challenge anyone who believes that to read David’s sublime poetry in Psalm 139 and not revise their opinion.

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.  
My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place,  
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed body.  
(Psalm 139:13-15)*

(Stirring words – although rather less so in the version once mistyped by my secretary at the top of the church notice sheet: *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully **mad!***)

The human organism is an extraordinary machine, but there's so much more to us than that. Consider what human beings have achieved in the realms of music, literature and the arts; in science and technology, especially in the last 100 years; in the areas of politics, business and wealth generation... I could go on. You may say, *but humans have used all those abilities to do terrible things too*. Absolutely true – and that inevitably introduces next week's topic, the fallenness of mankind. But for now, let's stay with the *awesomeness* of humanity; next time we will have to come to grips with our *awfulness* too. In spite of it all, we are amazing.

6) The second way we resemble God is that we are **free to choose**. God is a completely free agent, as Psalm 115:2 testifies:

*Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*

We can only truly be said to have been made in God's image, if we too have freedom to do what we please. We will see next week that, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were free to decide which voice to listen to, God's or the Serpent's, and which tree to eat from. Knowing all the pain and tragedy that has resulted from human freedom to choose, many people will ask: *Was it really worth it? Was God right to give us so much freedom?* Again we are straying into future topics – it's almost impossible to keep the threads separate – but God clearly thinks it was worth it, so much so that he was willing to enter the mess we'd made, at staggering personal cost, and redeem it.

7) What makes our freedom such a dangerous gift, is that God also made us **powerful** – another way we bear his image. That means our choices have real consequences; they can result in incredible good or devastating evil. So just how powerful is the human race?

*Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'* (Genesis 1:26)

In old-fashioned language, mankind collectively was given 'dominion' over the earth. Obviously there are limits; we are not all-powerful like God. Nonetheless human beings have vast potential to act, create and make a difference to the world around us. That's a lot of *power* to use for good or ill.

We will explore these things more later on, but again people ask, *was God right to make us both **powerful and free** and therefore so dangerous to ourselves and others?* Let me ask these questions in reply: are you glad to have been given the gift of life, even though life can be very painful, as well as very wonderful? And would you really want to exist without freedom to act, create and make a difference? What would we be without that? Robots? Slaves? Certainly not creatures who can freely choose to enter into relationship with our Maker.

## Action

I have tried to make these studies practical as well as didactic so, in closing, here are a few simple applications of the Doctrine of Creation which I will develop only briefly:

1) **Let Creation lead you to worship.** God's world is so incredible you would have to be a stone not to be moved by it. Go for a walk, a cycle ride or just sit in the garden... and be amazed! Recently, I was fortunate to be up in the Lake District just as '*spring had sprung*'! There were more than enough daffodils to satisfy Wordsworth and I was privileged to witness the miracle of new-born lambs discovering they had legs and taking their first shaky steps. (And of course, I hope to experience another miracle of nature when, in no time at all, those fragile legs will have turned into a delicious Sunday roast – apologies to vegetarians, another group among whom I have many friends and so no wish to offend!) God's Creation is so achingly beautiful surely we feel compelled to worship someone or something?

2) **Love Creation.** Care for God's world. Explore ways of living more sustainably. This is not a Party Political Broadcast for the Green Party, but concern for the environment is a healthy expression of reverence for Creation.

3) **Develop the natural talents and abilities God has given you.** After all, you *are* amazing! Whether they are artistic, practical, intellectual or 'people skills' you were made in God's image with unique gifts. It is to his glory that you develop and use them for the good of others and your own enjoyment.

4) **See others as products of God's creative genius.** Look for the image of God in them too. What would life be like if we habitually saw other people, not as irritating nuisances or means to our own ends, but as masterpieces of divine artistry? It might just change your day for the better!

## Notes:

1. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, SPCK 2011

2. *Ibid.*

3. © 1994 Mercy/Vineyard Publishing (adm by Vineyard Music Group (UK)) and Vineyard Songs (Canada) (adm by CopyCare Ltd.)

4. Reported on the BBC News website 4 March 2015



# Doctrine Two: Fall

One of the motivating spurs for this sermon series was an interview with Stephen Fry on the RTE (Irish national television) programme *The Meaning of Life*, in which he made an impassioned defence of his atheism that went on to become a minor internet sensation.<sup>1</sup> Gay Byrne, the interviewer, asked:

*“Suppose it’s all true, and you walk up to the pearly gates, and are confronted by God: What will Stephen Fry say to him, her, or it?” Fry replied: “I’d say, bone cancer in children? What’s that about? How dare you? How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It’s not right, it’s utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain. That’s what I would say.”*

Stephen Fry clearly speaks for a lot of people. At the time of writing, 61,000 people have ‘liked’ it on YouTube, compared to 4,300 who didn’t. Maybe there is a part of you that secretly agrees with what he says. *What if he’s right? Hasn’t he got a point, after all?* Public statements of atheism (albeit not usually quite as robust as this) are becoming increasingly common. When the speaker is a hugely popular and articulate actor, writer and TV personality like Stephen Fry (frequently described as a ‘national treasure’) we can very easily feel intimidated or forced onto the back foot by his arguments.

My aim in these talks is to restore our confidence in a biblical worldview. Of course we now live in a pluralistic ‘market place’ of ideologies and beliefs, where Christianity is just one among many, but in my view it still makes a lot of sense of reality – the best sense, in fact. We may not all be quick-witted, skilful debaters like Stephen Fry (I, for one, wouldn’t want to go head-to-head with him!) but being able to make a compelling case by quick thinking, facility with words, and a strong appeal to the emotions, doesn’t make him right. Christian theology has grappled with these issues for centuries and Fry is far too intelligent and well-read not to know it. Rather, he chooses to ignore large areas of Christian thought in order to build the strongest case he can.

More of Stephen Fry shortly, but first back to our ‘anchor’ in the first chapter of Ephesians:

*Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free either: Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. (Ephesians 1:7-9, The Message)*

Paul talks about a long-range plan, which God took delight in making, to set us free from a dreadful situation which he clearly considers is of our making, not God’s. To begin to answer Stephen Fry’s argument, we have to face the question: if God made a good creation, with humanity as its crowning glory (made in God’s image to co-rule earth with him), where did it all go so horribly wrong? It is actually the age-old problem of *theodicy*: how could a good, just and loving God create a world with so much evil in it and then *seem* to stand by and do nothing about it?

The short answer is: *He didn't; we did! (...and he doesn't stand by and do nothing!)* God made everything good; but we messed it up. We saw in the last sermon that an essential part of bearing God's image is that we have *real freedom to make real choices which have real consequences*. We have been doing that since the dawn of history and many of those choices have been really bad ones and have had some really bad consequences.

The biblical account of Creation in Genesis 1 & 2 is immediately followed by the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. Whether you read this as a literal account (what a TV crew might have filmed) or as a sublime, divinely-inspired poetic reflection on the origins of the human race, the message is exactly the same. It's all about choices and their consequences. The first choice was which voice to listen to: God or the Serpent? The second was which to believe, and the third choice was which tree to eat from. There were two voices and two trees, the consequences had been explained to them, but they were free to choose. They chose to listen to the deceiver and eat the forbidden fruit.

Genesis brilliantly illustrates how one poor choice leads to another and the whole thing quickly escalates until we find ourselves trapped in a cycle of wrongdoing. Firstly they try to cover up their sin, then they try to hide from God, then they start blaming one another... and within a generation, it has escalated to murder! This has been the tragic story of the human race ever since: cover ups and tit-for-tat evil embroiling us deeper and deeper in a web of actions which cause us and others to suffer. What started out as the exercise of our freedom has become a prison from which we cannot escape. We're now in this far too deep. Consider any deep-seated generational conflict – between Israelis and Palestinians; or between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland – and you can see the human drama played out in all its enslaving and deadly horror.

Genesis 3 goes on to summarise succinctly some further consequences of humanity's first poor choice. Let's note these without stopping to look at them in depth.

1. *Spiritual* death – not physical death at that moment, but an end to the easy, unbroken relationship they had so far enjoyed with God and one another.
2. Physical pain in childbearing.
3. Male domination of women.
4. A curse on the ground leading to back-breaking labour to tame it.

In other words, human wrongdoing severely damages our relationships with God, ourselves, one another, and the rest of creation. Everything has been thrown out of kilter by our choices, including the natural world which no longer functions the way God intended. Within this Judeo-Christian understanding of the world, Stephen Fry's question '*How dare God make a world where innocent people suffer?*' makes no sense. He didn't... we did.

Someone may come back and say: *Ah, but that's not fair, because God still made us with the freedom to do all that. He must have known what would happen and still stood by and let it.* It comes down to the question: *what price freedom?* God appears to believe that creating free people, who can willingly choose to love Him – or not – was worth all the trouble it could potentially cause. Let's think about that for a minute. I asked last time:

*Are you glad to have been given the gift of life, even though life can be very painful, as well as very wonderful? Would you really want to exist without freedom to act, create and make a difference? What would we be without that? Robots? Slaves? Certainly not creatures able to freely enter into relationship with our Creator.*

So, what price freedom? Was it all worth it? God seems to think so – and remember we are still in the middle of the story, prior to its final resolution. Things will look very different from the perspective of eternity when God has finally *worked all things together for good*. What price freedom? Jumping ahead two chapters, the ultimate price was the life of God's Son. Jesus freely chose to die – to undo the ill effects of human freedom and to restore true freedom to us. As Paul said in our keynote passage from Ephesians:

*Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free either: Abundantly free!*

But we are getting ahead of ourselves – all the way to Redemption! For the moment, let's focus on the classic Christian doctrine of the Fall: the *falleness* of humanity and, as a result, of Creation as well. We have explained this in terms of our *real freedom to make real choices which have real consequences* and trap us in patterns of wrongdoing we are no longer able to break free from. (Perhaps the clearest illustration would be a drug addict whose first 'trip' is an exciting adventure freely entered into, but who quickly finds him or herself in a nightmare bondage which robs them of the very freedom it all began with.)

The language of freedom, choice and consequences may be more easily understandable in today's culture than Paul's talk of sin and judgment, but it comes to the same thing:

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... (and) the wages of sin is death.*  
(Romans 3:23 & 6:23)

Can you see how, contrary to popular belief, this view of a world made by a good Creator, but thrown out of kilter by human sin, makes a lot of sense of life as we experience it? In particular, it makes good sense of two age-old, closely related, paradoxes: the beauty and the beastliness of the natural world... and of humanity. How else can we explain the fact that nature and the human race are both very good, and very bad, at the same time?

## **'Nature red in tooth and claw'**

Stephen Fry's point is compelling: *Why bone cancer in children?* How can we claim God's Creation is good when it seems to inflict so much undeserved suffering? Later in the same interview, Fry continued his diatribe (against a God he claims not to believe in):

*Yes, the world is very splendid, but it also has in it insects whose whole life cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. Why? Why did you do that to us? It is simply not acceptable.<sup>2</sup>*

We are saying: *God didn't do that; we did*. But how can that be? No one deliberately set out to pervert or distort the life cycle of that particular insect... it happened as a result of *the law of unintended consequences*. This 'law' states that one choice leads to another and develops into an unimaginably complex web of cause and effect, which has both intended and unintended consequences, for us and the world we inhabit. To trace that entire chain of cause and effect from the start of time would be even more complicated than mapping the human genome or explaining quantum physics! Once a moral boundary has been crossed, we have no way of knowing what the ultimate consequences may be. Consider a few examples of the unintended results from just one strand of sinful human behaviour: greed and ambition.

1. **The Spice Trade.** When European merchants started getting rich by exploiting the spices they had discovered in the Far East, no-one dreamt they would also bring back the Black Death which eventually wiped out at least a third of Europe's population.
2. **Tobacco.** To begin with the tobacco business must have seemed like a 'win-win', bringing innocent pleasure (and even health benefits, it was believed) to smokers, as well as great wealth to the growers and importers. No-one imagined that smoking would have fatal effects on our health and become a major driver of the slave trade.
3. **Colonialism.** Again, greedy Europeans not only murdered and dispossessed native peoples of their lands (in the Americas, for instance) but indirectly caused the deaths of far more by bringing diseases to which they had no natural immunity.
4. **Climate change.** We had no idea, when we started burning fossil fuels as the power-source of the industrial revolution, that we were also putting the whole balance of earth's atmosphere at risk. But the general consensus now is that we have done.
5. **Rainforests.** Similarly, timber from the rainforests must have seemed like a God-send, an endless source of income for some of the world's poorest countries. But now we know that deforestation is seriously damaging our planet's eco-systems.

Multiply examples like that, and add in others we know nothing about, and you begin to see how even what we call 'natural disasters' may actually be the unintended and unforeseen consequences of human greed – or other sins – past or present. Taken together, the Doctrines of Creation and Fall help us to make sense of the phenomenon of '*nature red in tooth and claw*'. God didn't make it that way – human actions have thrown it out of balance.

## The human enigma

How can it be that mankind is so wonderful and so terrible at the same time? We humans are a constant puzzle. We can be heroic and horrific, awesome and awful all at the same time. We can rise to dizzying heights of heroism and sink to dreadful depths of depravity... on the same afternoon! We can use our creative powers for sublime works of art or

sickening pornography. We can turn our God-given inventiveness to find cures for fatal diseases... and to create horrific weapons of mass destruction. Again, these two doctrines help us to make sense of the highs and lows, the triumphs and tragedies of the human race. God made us very good, fearfully and wonderfully, as the pinnacle of his creation – and that goodness and beauty still shines through – but our collective choices have also locked us into patterns of sinful behaviour with devastating consequences for us and creation. Abusing our God-given freedom has left us in a bind we are unable to rescue ourselves from.

To me, that is a very plausible understanding of reality. Atheists like Stephen Fry make the Christian worldview sound absurd by ignoring, or vastly underestimating, the power of human choices, not just to spoil our lives and those near us, but the whole created order. Sin is much more than just fiddling my taxes or having lustful thoughts, or even making my family's life hell from time to time. Sin is cosmic. Because all human beings are ultimately interrelated (*no man is an island*) one person's actions can affect the whole human race. That's easy to see in the case of a Hitler or a Churchill, but what about the unintended and unseen consequences of my actions (and yours) for good or ill? And as we've just seen, since humanity and the natural world are closely interrelated, sin has put creation out of joint too.

As a teenager, the poignancy of the Fall was brought home to me through studying the poetry of the English Jesuit priest, Gerard Manly Hopkins – in spite of his convoluted use of language! His short poem 'Spring and Fall' (the title itself a pun) may have been triggered by an actual event and pictures a young child weeping as the leaves fall in autumn:

*Márgarét, áre you gríeving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leáves like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
Ah! ás the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;  
And yet you will weep and know why.  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sórrów's spríngs áre the same.  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.*

Paul also captures the tragedy of a fallen world – and God's redemptive plan for it – in the majestic eighth chapter of Romans:

*The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*(Romans 8:19-21)

How amazing that, although our freedom was the cause of the problem, God's answer is not to take away that freedom, but to restore it through Christ and then, through our liberation, set the whole creation free. As we shall see in the next two sermons, the depth of humanity's fall is matched, and exceeded, by the audacity and brilliance of God's rescue operation. Like a man grabbing hold of the china cabinet as he trips over the carpet, we may have taken Creation down with us when we fell, but God will restore all things in Christ. Paul goes on,

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time...* (Romans 8:22)

It is not only human mothers who experience pain in childbirth as a result of the Fall – the whole natural universe continues to groan in labour until God's Kingdom has fully come.

## **Action**

- 1) **Don't be afraid of atheists... we have a credible worldview too.** If you ignore the Doctrine of the Fall, it's very easy to pillory Christianity as Stephen Fry does. If you take seriously the fallenness of man, and consequently of creation, the painful realities of human existence begin to make a lot more sense.
- 2) **Look for the image of God in others.** In spite of our fallen state, we are still amazing! Try to see that created glory in others, rather than the shortcomings which are common to all humanity. It will definitely improve your day!
- 3) **But don't be surprised to find the image of Adam as well.** You will spare yourself a lot of grief if you accept that we are all enigmatic: awesome one minute, awful the next; heroic one minute, horrific the next!
- 4) **Forgive and be forgiven.** Jesus taught that it's easier to forgive others when you know you need forgiving yourself. But he also said: don't expect to be forgiven, if you refuse to forgive others.
- 5) **Live in hope of Redemption.** As one translation of Romans 8:19 puts it, all creation is '*straining on tiptoe*' to see the sons of God revealed. So should we be. The purpose of this sermon is not to depress us, not to say: *Humanity is a fallen race; we're part of a broken creation... have a nice day!* The gospel is God's salvation plan. He is in the business of mending broken humanity and, ultimately, a broken creation. If that isn't what this Christian thing is all about, then what is it? Like any construction site, it can appear messy and unfinished. Redemption is a work in progress, but we know it's moving towards the day when everything will be restored. That makes us the most hopeful people in the world – or as FGBMI used to say, the '*happiest people on earth*'.

Our freedom is important to God; he is intent on respecting and preserving our free choice because it's part of his image in us. When we bring our broken humanity into his presence (whether broken health or broken hearts, broken relationships or broken dreams) we join creation on tiptoe. Today may be the day a particular piece of brokenness is mended. But even if today isn't your day – maybe because that job is part of Phase 3 and we are still in Phase 2 of God's great reconstruction project – your faith will be rewarded on the day when everything is made new and whole in Christ.

## **Notes**

1. Broadcast on 15 February 2015. Available to watch on YouTube.
2. As above



# **Doctrine Three: Incarnation**

In these five talks we are aiming to locate our lives within the context of eternity: to see where our individual stories fit within the Great Story, and to understand how our small walk-on part is vital to the progress and flow of God's whole redemptive drama. So far we have seen that everything that is owes its existence to God the Creator, and that He made everything very good. (We can debate the *how* and *when* of Creation, but the *who* and *why* are non-negotiables of Christian faith.) At the pinnacle of God's creation, the human race was made in God's image, powerful and free, to rule the earth with Him. God gave humanity real freedom to make real choices which have real consequences... with the tragic result that we became a fallen race. This explains the enigma of humanity, bearing both the image of God and the indelible mark of the Fall: awesome and awful, heroic and horrific at the same time. Even the natural universe has been thrown out of kilter by human choices made since the dawn of history, and before that we may speculate, by the choices of fallen angels led by Lucifer or Satan. The last study ended with the wonderful passage from Romans 8 about creation waiting in eager expectation (or *straining on tiptoe*) for its liberation as a result of the liberation of the human race, and concluded:

*As we shall see in the next two sermons, the depth of humanity's fall is matched and exceeded by the audacity and sheer brilliance of God's rescue plan.*

## **Why eat chilli at Christmas?**

I wonder if you can see where I'm going with this rather bizarre menu suggestion? 'Christmas' is the colloquial name for a Christian festival properly called '*The Feast of the Incarnation*'. So if you want to try and impress your friends, you could try asking, '*What are you planning to do for the Feast of the Incarnation this year?*', although you might get some strange looks. You would probably get even stranger ones if you started wishing people a '*Happy Incarnation*'. They might even think you were talking about *Reincarnation* – so let's be clear straightaway that those are two totally different doctrines. Christians do believe in *Incarnation*; they definitely do not believe in *Reincarnation* (even if you did in a previous life, as the old joke goes!)

Chilli con Carne, on the other hand, is a South American dish which literally means 'chillies with flesh or meat' (*carnivores* please take note!) The word *incarnation* derives from the same Latin root and so means '*in-flesh-ment*' or '*with meat on*'. In other words, by this tortuous logic, what we celebrate at Christmas is the astonishing fact of the '*in-fleshing*' of God. You could say that Jesus is '*God...con carne*' – God with meat on! The classic Christian doctrine states that Jesus Christ is (and always has been) fully God and, at his incarnation, became fully man too. He is now and forevermore fully God and fully man, true God and true man, 100% God and 100% man. This is unequivocally stated in John 1:14:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

[Or as The Message puts it:

*The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.]*

Colossians 2:9 makes the staggering claim that:

*In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*

It may seem strange to us that a lot of the church's energy in the first few centuries of its existence was taken up fighting heretical beliefs such as Gnosticism, Docetism and Arianism. (Naturally, few Christians are any longer aware what those doctrines were – even if some of us still believe them without realising it!) All these heresies concern the person of Christ. Some of them downplayed his humanity, saying he was truly God, but only pretending or appearing to be a man. Others downplayed his divinity, saying he was fully human, but not really God – just very God-like, or very full of the Spirit. But mainstream, orthodox Christianity has always held out for the more 'difficult' doctrines of the Trinity (one God in three persons) and the Incarnation (true God and true man) as expressed in the rather wordy and therefore little-used Athanasian Creed:

*For the right Faith is that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world; Perfect God, and Perfect Man.*

## **How much help is the human mind?**

At this point, typically, our minds begin to protest, or at least fill with questions. *How can Jesus be completely God and completely man at the same time? What would that **feel** like? It doesn't make sense - that's just not how percentages work. (How could a shirt be 100% polyester and 100% cotton at the same time?!) You may have noticed that all the doctrines we are looking at are hard to get your head around. Get used to it! The human mind is a great gift, but it is finite and limited. Therefore it has a difficult time comprehending the infinite. Also, as we saw last time, our minds are fallen and fallible – we can be deceived or just plain mistaken. Therefore, the mind is not a totally reliable guide as the final arbiter between truth and falsehood, any more than our emotions are. We walk a fine line between two extremes here: Christian faith is not *irrational* – it has intellectual credibility and makes good sense of the world. But it can never be arrived at, or fully understood, through reason alone. The mind is an indispensable God-given tool, especially when surrendered to Christ, but some things are only discovered by God's gracious intervention.*

Look at it this way. Reason, science, the intellect... are good at answering the questions: *where, when, what* and, to some extent, *how*. The Bible is not indifferent to those, but is much more interested in the questions: *who* and *why*. In the first sermon, for instance, we saw that we do not need to take up a stance opposing science, which is simply an

exploration of the *what, when* and *how* of Creation. But science is not so helpful when it comes to *who* made it all, and *why*. In the second sermon, we found that philosophy and the arts can explore the brokenness of Creation and the enigma of humanity – the fact that we are heroic and horrific, awesome and awful, at the same time. But they cannot seem to tell us *why* creation is broken and humanity fallen, nor *who's* responsible for the mess. Now as we begin to explore how God mends a broken Creation and lifts a fallen humanity, our minds alone are even less help. God's Rescue Plan can only be discovered by revelation. The nearer we get to the holy of holies, the burning heart of the God who is a 'consuming fire', the more we have to lean on His revelation and less on our finite, fallen and fallible intellect.

There was a whole school of Medieval thought (known as Scholasticism) which believed you could arrive at the Gospel simply by thinking things through really clearly and logically. This movement is epitomised by Anselm of Canterbury's book *Cur Deus Homo (Why God became Man)* which sets out to prove the Incarnation philosophically without direct reference to the Bible. It takes the form of a debate between Anselm and an unfortunately-named character called Boso. He *is* a bit of a 'Bozo', or at least a stooge, because all he does is ask questions that Anselm answers brilliantly, and then says things like: *'That was a really good answer. I can't fault your logic there. You've certainly demolished all my objections now!'* I'm sure this approach was well intentioned and produced some valuable theology (it also played a large part in the founding of modern universities) – but it seems a long way from Paul's outlook. Saul (later Paul) grew up in a similar environment of rigorous religious scholarship and debate, but it took an encounter with the Risen Christ, which threw him off his horse and left him temporarily blind, to convince him that Jesus is both God and man!

## **Christ is the answer**

Paul often talks about the 'mystery', or in Greek '*mysterion*' (not to be confused with the *Mysterons*, for those who remember the Gerry Anderson TV series *Captain Scarlet!*). He says that this mystery has been hidden for generations, and has just recently been unveiled, not because a group of clever people discovered it (like the scientists who mapped the human genome), but because God has made it known. Look at Colossians 1:26-27:

*...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

God's big secret, the mystery now made known, is not a mathematical equation, a scientific formula, or even a ten-step business plan... but a Person: Jesus Christ, God and man. He is God's rescue plan for his fallen and broken Creation. It is truly '*all about Him*'. He is the Centre of the Universe.

When I was a teenager, people used to wear stickers declaring '*Christ is the answer*'. You could be sure some smart Alec would ask, '*if Christ is the answer, then what's the question?*' Classic Christian faith declares that he is the answer to any question we could ask about the meaning, significance, purpose and destiny of the universe. He is the answer to how God will fix the mess we have made of His good Creation... and of our own lives. He is the answer to questions like: '*is there hope for the world?*' and crucially, '*Is there hope for me?*' I love the way Eugene Peterson translates our anchor verses for this chapter, Ephesians 1:11-12:

*It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.*

Who wouldn't want to know *who they are* and *what we're living for*? Jesus is the Answer. Having issued all those warnings about the limitations of the human mind, let's probe a little deeper and see if we can, very incompletely, answer Anselm's question: *Cur Deus Homo? Why did God become Man?* There must be many reasons, some we can comprehend, and others so deep in the purposes of God that we may never know them, but here are a few.

## **Cur Deus homo?**

### **1) God wants to live with us.**

God has always planned to live among human beings. Many people think of God as far off and distant, but that feeling is a consequence of the Fall, not part of God's original intention. In the Garden of Eden, He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. In the Incarnation, John tells us, *God became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood*. And right at the end of the Bible, in the Book of Revelation, we find out where all this is heading:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4)*

God's desire has always been for relationship and, if I can put it this way, co-habitation with human beings. The Incarnation reaffirms that intention, in spite of the distance introduced by the Fall. Wonderfully, it also enables us to experience His presence dwelling with us now.

## **2) He had to become one of us to save us.**

This is really the trailer for the next subject, because the Incarnation is the necessary prelude to redemption, reconciliation and salvation. Theories of the atonement can get very complicated, but at its simplest: The Redeemer had to be God because only God can save us. And he had to be human because man made the mess and a man had to clear it up. That's what Paul was getting at when he called Jesus the 'Second Adam'. The first Adam was where it all went wrong. The second (or last) Adam puts it all right.

## **3) To be the first of a new humanity.**

Jesus shows us what human beings were supposed to be like before sin got in the way and what we shall be like through his redeeming work. He is the first new man, the first instalment of God's new creation. Romans 8:29 says,

*For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

The amazing truth is that you and I are going to be like Jesus! Not just like Jesus in his earthly life, showing us what perfect sinless humanity looks like, but like the Risen Jesus – astonishing! God has begun that work in us already, and he will carry it on into eternity, because he always completes what he begins (Philippians 1:6).

## **4) To win our love.**

This builds on the first three points. God desires relationship with human beings. He created us as free agents because he longs for willing lovers, not pressganged slaves. In order to achieve that, he had to come to us in the only way we could understand – and the only way we would *feel understood* – as a human being. Philippians 2:5-11 shows that this involved a huge act of humility and self-emptying on God's part. He has truly come down to our level. Hebrews 4:15 tells us he is able to sympathise with our weaknesses because he's been there. He became our brother and walked in our shoes... in order to win our love. The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard told the following parable to try and illustrate God's motivation in the Incarnation. No analogy is perfect, but this touching story gives us a moving insight into the heart of God.

### ***The King and the Maiden (Søren Kierkegaard)***<sup>1</sup>

*Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents.*

*And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist – no one dared resist him. But would she love him?*

*She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.*

*The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity – He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.*

## **Action**

When we realise that this God-and-man/human-and-divine reality of Incarnation is God's preferred method of working in the world, it makes sense of a lot of things we would otherwise struggle to understand. For instance:

1) **Our lives.** Most of us have things in our homes we don't know what to do with: a piece of furniture which doesn't fit in any of our rooms; sentimental objects from the past we never look at, but cannot bring ourselves to get rid of; possessions we no longer have a use for, but seem too good to throw away. Similarly, we all have awkward, perplexing, painful things in our lives which don't fit with our idea of how God should work, or what our lives should be like as Christians. How do we make sense of those things? If you are a born-again, baptised, confirmed, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, committed Christian (or any combination of the above!) your life is now both a human and divine reality. You are still 100% human, but you are no longer *merely* human. The new life of God's Spirit has been born in you. Christ is being formed in the womb of your soul – just as he was formed in Mary's womb. Our experiences are still very human, but they are never *only* human. Now God is working all things together for good (especially the things we struggle to make sense of). There are times when all we can see is the human bit and have to take the divine reality by faith – that even in our worst moments, God's grace, love, mercy and power are at work. And as Paul says, none of these things can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

2) **The Church.** Similarly, church is a human and divine entity. I sense something happening today that was also happening when I first came to Christ forty years ago: some people are giving up on the church. I understand why: because bad stuff happens in church – all churches, not just some. Perplexing, painful things happen in church, which comes as a shock to us. It doesn't seem right. However, when we realise that the church is both a human and a divine thing, it helps us hang in there and not get disillusioned. The church is 100% a human organisation and some very earthy, fleshly things go on there, but it isn't *merely* a human institution. It's the Body of Christ. His Spirit dwells here. The church is God's chosen vessel to reach the world with the Good News of Jesus. As Paul says, the treasure is in jars of clay (or earthen vessels)... but there is gold in them there Christians! I have a lot of sympathy with people who say, *'I've had it with church: I've been so hurt, or disappointed, or let down by it. I'll carry on my relationship with Jesus, and maybe meet with close Christian friends, but I'm through with church.'* I understand... but I think it's a big mistake. The principle of Incarnation can help us not to give up on church even when it shows its human side.

3) **The Bible.** Another good example of this human-and-divine thing is the Bible. It's a book by human beings about human stuff... and yet it's also God's Book, inspired by His Spirit. We struggle with some of the human bits – massacres, ethnic cleansing, murder, adultery. In fact the whole of life is in Scripture! But when we read it with care, through the lens of Christ, and with the help of the Holy Spirit who inspired it, it begins to come into focus and God's nature and revelation shine through every part. Many of the Bible quotations in this series are from Eugene Peterson's rendering in *The Message*, which I find a particularly rich compliment to the standard translations. That sense was enhanced by reading some of Eugene Peterson's other books and feeling I had begun to get to know the man and gain an appreciation for his ministry as a pastor, theologian and poet. Now when I read Ephesians 1 in *The Message*, I hear Peterson's voice as well as Paul's, and behind both those very different human personalities, the Holy Spirit's voice. Isn't that just a distraction from hearing the undiluted voice of God? On the contrary, that's the way God chooses to speak – through human beings, in their historical context, and with all their peculiarities and particularities. It's the incarnation principle.

4) **The Cross.** Most spectacularly of all, the human-divine Incarnation reality turns the death of Jesus on the cross from an incomprehensible disaster into a glorious source of hope... but that's the subject of the next chapter.

## Notes

1. From Kierkegaard's 'Philosophical Fragments', 1844. Our friends at Bath Youth for Christ have made a short film of this parable which can be viewed on [vimeo.com/113905875](https://vimeo.com/113905875) or [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghXx3Nyz\\_ZY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghXx3Nyz_ZY)



# **Doctrine Four: Redemption**

*God didn't send me out to collect a following for myself, but to preach the Message of what he has done, collecting a following for him. And he didn't send me to do it with a lot of fancy rhetoric of my own, lest the powerful action at the centre—Christ on the Cross—be trivialized into mere words.*

*The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hell-bent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written,*

*I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head,  
I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots.*

*So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—preaching, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.*

*While Jews clamour for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle—and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's "weakness."  
(1 Corinthians 1:17-25, The Message)*

Two key themes of the last chapter converge in this wonderful piece of Pauline writing. First, the way the Incarnation principle (divinity manifested in humanity) runs through all God's works. And secondly, the limitations of human reason when dealing with the deepest realities. Tom Wright suggests Paul is having a bit of fun with his audience in this passage because he appears to be renouncing Greek rhetoric and wisdom, whilst using a beautifully crafted rhetorical argument! But he is just making the same point we made last time about the limitedness of human reason. The intellect is a good servant, but a bad master; a useful tool, but a poor measuring rod – so not to be treated as the final arbiter. That is because the human mind, like everything else about us, is fallen, fallible and finite.

The first point is especially important as we turn to the central fact of the Christian Faith. The Cross only makes sense because the One who died there is both God and man. If it was just about the death of a human being, the cross would have no power to save us. On the other hand, if God had just pretended to be human, and therefore only pretended to die, that would be meaningless too. Jesus has to be God to save us – because only God can save – and he has to be man to identify with us and enter the mess caused by our fallenness in order to redeem it. Supremely, the Cross is a divine-human, God-and-man reality. That's what makes it so powerful. Paul sums up his argument in 1 Corinthians 2:2:

*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

Ask Paul what is the very heart of the Christian message and he will say: Christ and the Cross. The Cross stands at the centre of time and eternity, space and infinity, and changes everything for us... and for the whole of creation. This is the mystery-recently-made-known that Paul goes on about. Jesus is the key that unlocks everything else, the answer to every important question, the solution to every intractable problem. And that key has two parts: his person and his Work; Christ and the Cross; Incarnation and Salvation. It is *who he is* and *what he did*. God became man *and* died and rose again. What he did makes no sense apart from who he is. Who he is cannot save us apart from what he did for us on the Cross.

Seen purely humanly, the Cross is a scandal and an outrage – demonic, unjust, the ultimate victory of evil over good – it makes no sense at all. But seen from God’s divine perspective, through the eyes of the Spirit, it is the central event of history, the means of salvation and hope for us and the whole of creation. Although he was one of the cleverest men of his day, Paul didn’t get it at all – it was offensive to him – until he had a revelation, a ‘one-to-one’ with Jesus, who showed him the true meaning of the cross. We will never ‘get it’ by words alone either... until God reveals the power and meaning of the cross to our hearts.

Does that mean there’s nothing we can say about how and why the Cross is so powerful? Do we just have to keep a reverent silence and accept it by faith? That would make for some very short sermons! The New Testament gives us a number of pictures to help us understand Salvation through Christ’s work on the cross, how it is that a man undergoing a shameful Roman execution sets us free from the guilt and consequences of our wrong choices. Nicky Gumbel summarises these in the third Alpha talk, *Why did Jesus die?* which can be found on YouTube or in the book ‘Questions of Life’.

## **Atonement images**

The following table lists some of the main New Testament images for the atonement – the saving work of Christ on the Cross. It is better to think of these as pictures of what the Cross does for us, rather than complete explanations of how it works. If we are looking to the Bible for a full explanation of the divine mystery of the Cross, which is beyond human understanding, we will be disappointed. And do we really need to know exactly *how* it works anyway? I am writing this on a computer, but I have only the sketchiest understanding of its internal workings. I know my computer is very powerful, I am aware of some of the invaluable tasks it can perform for me and what I have to do to access those functions, but I have almost no understanding of micro-processors or computer programming. And yet I am still managing to write this perfectly adequately!

	<u>Sphere</u>					<u>Key idea</u>		
1)	Commerce					Payment		
2)	Law					Advocate		
3)	Slavery					Redeemer		
4)	Temple					Sacrifice		
5)	Household					Servant		
6)	Warfare					Victor		

1) Jesus' final words in John 19, *'It is finished'*, are a kind of pun – not in the sense that he was making a joke from the Cross (like Eric Idle in *Life of Brian!*) – but it is a play on words giving us an insight into what was going on in that moment. Ostensibly Jesus is just saying: *my ordeal is over, I've done what I had to do*. But the Greek word *tetelesthai* was also used in business transactions to signify that a debt had been fully paid and the deal was complete. Don't get too hung up on who he was repaying – in a sense, you could say he was paying himself. Rather read this as a powerful statement that everything necessary to save us has been done and no outstanding debts remain. And the New Testament hints that the price was unimaginable, including the depth of the Father's grief, and the Son's agony at being separated from the Father. *We have been bought at a great price – his precious blood*.

2) *Justification* is a legal term meaning found not guilty and declared righteous (*'just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned'*). In this image, Jesus is both the Judge and the Advocate, or defence lawyer, who pleads on our behalf. Nicky Gumbel uses the illustration of a judge who is compelled to find an old friend guilty in court... then takes off his wig and pays the fine for him. Justification and righteousness (both the same word in Greek) are massive ideas for Paul. Basically he is saying that Christ crucified and risen is God's way of putting everything right, not only human fallenness, but the consequent fracturing of Creation as well.

3) It is hard for us to imagine a world where people were openly bought and sold in slave markets. (Human trafficking is an equally serious, but more hidden, form of exploitation in our society). For a slave to be set free in Jesus' day, he or she needed to find a *redeemer* who was able and willing to pay the *ransom* price. If there is one theme running through all five of these sermons, it is *freedom*. God freely chose to make us in his own image with real freedom to make real choices which have real consequences. We freely chose to go our own way, creating havoc in our own lives and in God's good Creation. So God freely chose to become man in Christ, and the God-man freely chose to go to die... and all this in order to set us free! The Gospel is the ultimate 'liberation theology', the truest *'freedom song'*.

4) Animal sacrifice is another difficult concept for us. But deep down we can understand the need for a life given in exchange for another life, a substitute to bear the penalty for us. Hebrews tells us that animal sacrifice could never adequately do that; it was an elaborate illustration reminding us that our choices have serious consequences and pointing forwards to what Christ would do. On a lighter note, you may know the old trick question: *In the parable, who suffers most as a result of the Prodigal Son's rebellion? Is it the son himself, penniless and in a pigsty, or the heartbroken father longing for the son's return?*

The answer, of course, is neither: *It is the fattened calf that suffers most!* Jesus became the sacrificial Lamb who died in our place, the 'scapegoat' who carried our sins far away.

5) Jesus said '*I am among you as one who serves*' (Luke 22:27) and he demonstrated it by washing the disciples' feet. With stunning symmetry, the Master of the Universe became the Servant of All. This would almost certainly have evoked memories of the figure of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in Isaiah (particularly Chapter 53) who was '*pierced for our transgressions*' and '*crushed for our iniquities*'. Paul's great poem in Philippians 2:5-11 says that God was not content to humble himself by becoming a man, but went on to become a servant and, as his ultimate act of humble service, to die on the Cross. All human beings suffer. It is one of the most basic facts of life in a fallen world. But Jesus is *the* Suffering Servant. God suffers most of all and thereby redeems even our darkest moments of pain.

6) The final picture in the New Testament is of a cosmic battle between good and evil. This is sometimes referred to as the *Christus Victor* model of atonement. In this analogy, Jesus is our Champion (a bit like David confronting Goliath) who takes on all the powers of darkness, death and destruction in one monumental struggle to the death. It looked as if Jesus had lost – till he rose again and the principalities and powers discovered they had made a fatal error in trying to destroy him on the Cross. Jesus spectacularly turned the tables on sin, death and the devil and emerged victorious on our behalf. I love the old Easter hymn:

*The strife is o'er, the battle done;  
Now is the Victor's triumph won;  
O let the song of praise be sung: Alleluia!*

*The powers of death have done their worst,  
But Christ their legions has dispersed;  
Let shouts of praise and joy outburst: Alleluia!*

## **Him, not us.**

The great thing about all these images is that they do not depend on us. The Cross is not effective because of who we are, what we do, or how we feel. It's all about *who he is* and *what he's done*. He has paid the debt – the transaction is complete. He has successfully defended us in court and declared us righteous. He has redeemed and set us free by becoming our ransom. He has become the perfect sacrifice that takes away all sin. He has stooped to serve us in the most profound way. He has waged war in the cosmic battle and come through with victory for us. Add it all up and we see why Paul was so excited about the message of the Cross. It is quite simply God's way of putting everything right: all our fallenness, all our brokenness, even the impact of human choices on the created universe. From our viewpoint, we are still in process – there's work to be done and work for us to do. But from God's perspective, '*It is finished!*' Paul's biggest worry in 1 Corinthians 1:17 is that the Cross might be emptied of its power through human words:

*... he didn't send me to (preach) with a lot of fancy rhetoric of my own, lest the powerful action at the centre—Christ on the Cross—be trivialized into mere words.*

That should concern us too. The power of the Cross is so much more than our words. It works at an altogether deeper level. Children instinctively know the power of the Cross. When Primary School classes come to visit my church, they are fascinated by the crosses all around the building. The makers of cheap horror films understand the power of the Cross. How many corny old movies have you seen where supernatural evil kicks off and they wheel in a disreputable old priest in a scruffy cassock who goes into the place holding a big cross in front of him? The dying know the power of the cross. One of the most popular funeral hymns among non-churchgoers these days says, *'I will cling to the old rugged Cross'*. I once took the funeral of a lady who was a believer, but not a regular churchgoer, and her relatives told me a fascinating story. Near the end, when she was barely lucid or recognising anyone, a member of the family went to visit wearing an ordinary silver cross around her neck. The dying lady grabbed it with unexpected force and said, *'This will help me'*. She literally clung to the Cross at that near-death moment.

## **Action**

- 1) The Cross is the way into God's Kingdom. If you haven't come to Christ or trusted your life to him yet – today is the best day to do so! You can come as you are, bringing your brokenness and your deepest, darkest secrets. Bring the whole mess – whether it is the result of your own choices, other people's actions, or most likely, a combination of the two. Just be as honest about it all as you know how to, and the power of the Cross will begin to do its work of putting things right. And if there isn't time for that work to be finished in this life – because most of us have a lot that needs fixing – then it will be completed in eternity.
- 2) The Cross remains God's way of putting everything right – now and into eternity. Even if we first came to Christ many years ago, it is still the only place to come with the parts of our lives that still need fixing, forgiving, cleansing, mending, healing, or putting right in any other way. I am not suggesting you need to become a Christian all over again or dredge up long-forgiven sins. But most of us have plenty of up-to-date stuff that still needs dealing with!
- 3) Some people find visible signs or physical actions help them to do this. For instance, some can best express it by walking up to a big wooden cross and kneeling down, or leaving something symbolic at its foot (an object representing the old life we wish to leave behind, or words written on a piece of paper). For many Holy Communion is an enduring expression of dependence on what Jesus achieved on the Cross. After all, that is what this sacrament all about: coming again and again to receive the body and blood of Jesus, given on the Cross, to set us free and make us whole.
- 4) Finally, a couple of suggestions if you are at a stage in life when you would like to find out more about the power of the Cross. I have already recommended watching or reading the Alpha talk *'Why did Jesus die?'* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KgP3mgaeOw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KgP3mgaeOw)) There is another video I would like to recommend and that, more importantly, I think God would love you to see as well! It is a beautifully produced half hour TV programme called *'My hope'* (<http://myhopewithbillygraham.org.uk/programs/the-cross/>) featuring the famous evangelist Billy Graham, now well into his 90s. The simple, yet profound, message which he has been preaching for over sixty years is illustrated by moving contemporary testimonies.



# **Doctrine Five: Kingdom of God**

Very few people read Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (or watch Peter Jackson's film version) and remain indifferent to it. It is one of those 'love it or hate it' things and, as the first really big book I attempted to read as a child, I have been a 'lover' ever since. One of the things that makes *Lord of the Rings* so rich for me is that at least three of its main characters can be seen as 'Christ figures', depicting different aspects of Jesus' person and work (although the title of the trilogy does not refer to any of them, but to Sauron, the evil Lord who made and seeks to regain control of the rings.) Broadly, Gandalf represents Christ in his divinity – wise, powerful and timeless – and, of course, he goes through a dramatic a 'death' and 'resurrection' in the Mines of Moria. Frodo, on the other hand, represents Christ in his humanity, willing to make himself utterly vulnerable in obedience to the unseen Hand which, although not openly acknowledged, is nonetheless a very real presence guiding events throughout the story. In the final part of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*, the throne of Middle Earth is restored to a third Christ-type, Aragorn, who begins the saga as the shadowy and ambiguous figure known as Strider, but is progressively revealed to be the rightful heir. The restoration of the true King ushers in a new golden age of peace, stability and happiness.<sup>1</sup>

As I began to sketch out the prospectus for this sermon series (against the spectacular backdrop of the North Devon coast on an annual retreat at Lee Abbey), I knew immediately that there should be five talks and what the first four would be about. In that setting (or any other) I would definitely need to talk about the origin, and reason for existence, of such a breathtakingly beautiful universe (Doctrine of Creation). That would force us to ask how and why it all went so wrong (Doctrine of the Fall). That, in turn, would lead naturally to a consideration of God's two-stage rescue operation: entering a lost world by becoming man (Doctrine of Incarnation) and dying and rising again to put both fallen humanity and broken creation right again (Doctrine of Redemption).

But it wasn't quite so obvious what to make the final '*doctrine you can't live without*' (the fifth of these essential core beliefs which for me, when taken together, make good sense of reality as we experience it). The problem was there was an awful lot left to cover. For instance: what God is up to in the world at the moment – including the person and work of the Holy Spirit and the mission and destiny of the Church. And secondly, where it is all heading and how it will all end – ideally including the end times, the Second Coming of Christ, and the '*four last things*' (death, judgment, heaven and hell). To try and cover all that in one sermon would require a significant fastening of seat belts on the part of both preacher and congregation!

Eventually I settled on the theme of the Kingdom of God to tie it all together and the approach of posing four questions, which at first sound a bit random, but which hopefully take us to some of the places we need to visit before finishing this brief tour of the biblical 'big picture' in the light of contemporary Britain's slide from indifference to casual atheism. You will have guessed already that many subjects deserving consideration will have to be

skated over or even completely ignored. However, if it is true that Jesus (like Strider/ Aragorn) is the rightful King who is progressively reclaiming the lost territory of Earth, the following questions, among others, need to be faced.

1. ***Is God loving or angry?*** Very broadly, there are two faulty, but contrasting views of God currently in circulation among those who accept his existence (or who wish to dismiss that belief). The first is that God is distant and angry and all the world's troubles are evidence of his mounting impatience. The alternative view is that God is benign and loving, but weak – therefore tolerant of human weakness, but apparently unable to do anything about evil and its consequences. (Some even believe that God changed from one to the other somewhere between the Old and New Testament!)
2. ***What is God doing in the world today?*** The Bible encourages us to interpret the times and expect to see God's hand in human affairs. But that isn't always easy in an age of instant global communication, 24 hour news, and information overload – not to mention the rise of popular atheism as articulated by Stephen Fry in the interview quoted in the second talk. Sometimes the big picture can look very confusing.
3. ***Why is it so messy?*** If we accept that Jesus came to put right the harm done by human choices and that his saving work was *finished* on the Cross, why does so much still appear unresolved? Why is there plenty of evidence of God saving, healing and making things new in some places, but apparently not much in others? How can there still be so many loose ends and unanswered questions?
4. ***Where is it all heading?*** Is it all going to end well or badly? Is there a plan and progression behind human history which is leading somewhere, or is it all meaningless, haphazard and unpredictable? Is our craving for stories with happy endings the ultimate refusal to face reality, or evidence of an inborn awareness of how things should (and will eventually) be?

With these questions in mind, I encourage you to re-read our 'anchor' Bible passage in The Message version: Ephesians 1:3-23.

## **Is God loving or angry?**

Too often people fall into one or other of these two camps, but I suggest it is a false dichotomy. Compassion and anger, mercy and wrath, are not opposites, but two sides (or faces) of the same God. I hope I am not turning into a 'grumpy old man', but I sometimes wonder why I get *so angry* about things like vandalism, litter and graffiti! (I am not talking about 'street art' here, but people who spray paint on the name board outside our church, or drop drink cans and crisp packets in its grounds, when we are trying to preserve a pleasant environment for people who walk through.) After all, nobody actually dies or

suffers serious loss as a result of these actions, but somehow the needless disregard for other people's 'space' makes me angrier than far worse crimes committed in desperation. I am not saying I am right to feel that way, I just do!

On a cosmic level, God must get angry when his good Creation is defaced and spoiled – and, as we noted in the first talk, human beings are the crowning glory of that Creation. In the second sermon, we saw that God's creatures are constantly being hurt and harmed because humanity collectively uses our God-given freedom to follow our own desires rather than his. (Just turn on the evening news if you don't believe me.) We all frequently do things that cause others to suffer – deliberately or accidentally, directly or indirectly. How can a good Creator not be angry about that?

But the grief God feels at this senseless desecration does not for a moment negate the absolute reality of his love for every human being on earth. Love gets angry precisely because it cares. Out of control, abusive anger is another matter, but good parents often become angry *because of* their love for their children, not in spite of it. A five-year-old about to ride her bike onto a busy road she has been warned to keep off will rightly detect a note of anger in her parent's voice! And who can even imagine the feelings of a parent whose child has been abused by a trusted adult in their circle? Love and wrath are perfectly consistent aspects of God's nature as good, holy and just.

Paul says that before we knew Christ we were *objects of wrath* (Ephesians 2:3). In a sense, the whole world lives under the shadow of God's well-deserved anger, as an inescapable consequence of our poor choices and what they do to others. (Remember that being made in God's image means we have *real freedom to make real choices which have real consequences*). But divine wrath has nothing in common with the anger we typically experience, which is more often the projection of our own pain or frustrated desires onto one another. God's anger does not diminish his unending, undeserved, undiluted, unconditional love for all his creatures in the slightest. He is a good Father, not an angry, abusive one.

What's more, God's love trumps his anger. The biblical assertion that *mercy triumphs over judgment* (James 2:13) was the background to the third and fourth talks. Through Christ, God has enabled us to step out from under the shadow of his wrath into the cloudless sunshine of his grace... permanently.<sup>2</sup> He is the eternal King of Love and his righteous anger, whilst not inconsistent with this primary identity, has been overtaken by his mercy. A recent film charting Beach Boys' 'genius' Brian Wilson's recovery from mental illness touchingly ends with footage of the real Wilson singing, '*love and mercy is what we need tonight...*'<sup>3</sup> We do indeed. Love is the law, legal tender and native language of God's Kingdom. It is the atmosphere and eco-system in which everything under his rule lives and grows. The primacy of love is unmistakably demonstrated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is now no need for us to experience God's wrath... ever.

## What is God doing in the world today?

The kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' teaching and the concept which best unlocks our understanding of the current epoch in world history. Put simply, time is moving towards the day when everything in heaven and earth is made right and restored to wholeness under God's good, wise and loving kingship. We have already mentioned arguably the most ambitious, successful and influential movie franchise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far: Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (and its three-part 'prequel', *the Hobbit*). Why have these films struck such a chord with audiences? The epic quest to deliver fictional Middle Earth from the evil power of Sauron and restore it to its rightful beauty and goodness under its true King speaks to a deep longing within all of us. Unfashionable as it may be, something inside us knows that nothing will ever be right again until the right person is back in charge. This may be shocking, but I believe it is the same longing that drives young men and women to give up the life they know and travel to the Middle East to fight with 'Islamic State'. The end result could not be more different, but the instinctive desire is the same: to see a new world order brought about by a radically different kind of rule.

That is what Jesus announced 2000 years ago when he said variously: '*The Kingdom of God is at hand... the Kingdom of God is near... the Kingdom of God has come upon you... the Kingdom is within you.*' His hearers would have understood that he was talking about a longed-for new age, even better than the golden era of David's reign, when God's rule would be restored in Israel and throughout the world. In that sense, Christianity is the original *New Age Movement*! Most scholars now agree that Jesus' coming declares both that this longed-for reign of God is coming soon (although God's idea of *soon* may be a bit different from ours!), but also that it has already broken into the present age. So, blind eyes being opened, or the dead raised, or sinners pardoned, or storms stilled, or hungry crowds fed were all signs of this in-breaking Kingdom – the kind of things you would expect to happen where the King of Love is in charge. In short, God is intent on putting everything right through Jesus and bringing all things together under his wise and loving rule.

The Kingdom of God is advancing strongly throughout the world. That may not be so obvious just now in the UK, but worldwide it is a different story. The global reach of God's Kingdom is greater today than in any previous era. The Christian Church is growing vigorously in many parts of the world, experiencing the miraculous regularly, and claiming (some would argue) more members now living than in all other generations put together.

Talking of the Church, it and the Kingdom are not identical, but the two are inseparably linked. Paul's image of the Body of Christ strongly suggests that the Church is God's primary means of advancing his Kingdom on earth. As we saw in Chapter 3, the church is an incarnational mystery which often appears in all its human frailty and fallibility but, when filled with the Holy Spirit, becomes nonetheless a foretaste of renewed humanity and an

outpost of heaven on earth. Speaking personally, I would say that all my best and worst, most joyful and most painful, experiences of human relatedness have been within the Church! On balance, however, I agree with Bill Hybels' often quoted assessment that the local church is *'the hope of the world'*. In his book *Courageous Leadership*, Hybels elaborates on this statement:

*'There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breath-taking. Its potential unlimited.'*

## **Why is it so messy?**

All this begs the question: if God's Kingdom is steadily increasing throughout the world, and the church is the Spirit-filled agent of this advance, why is the overall picture still so confused? Why do there seem to be more Signs of the Kingdom (miracles, conversions and testimonies of lives, families and communities transformed) in some places than others? Why, for example, are people sometimes spontaneously healed and yet at other times Christians all over the world fast and pray with great faith to no apparent effect? <sup>4</sup>

Although the kingdom of God is advancing and unstoppable, it has not yet *fully* come and until it does, there will always be this ambiguity. Corrie ten Boom used to use the analogy of a tapestry. Because we are looking from below (at the underside) what we see sometimes looks more like a knotted mess of threads than a beautiful design. However, when the Kingdom is fully realised every eye will see what God already sees – the beauty he is weaving out of our freedom. Not only, as Paul says, are we his *work of art* (Ephesians 2:10), but we are also co-creators in something far greater than we can imagine. Until then, a number of factors are still in play, feeding into the messiness.

To begin with, we are still part of a fallen world and a broken creation. We still live with the consequences of human choices for evil as well as good. (We examined these themes in detail in the first two chapters on the *Doctrines of Creation and Fall*.) Secondly, although defeated on the Cross, the devil is still active in the world and fighting all the more fiercely because he knows his time is short. Our society prefers to dismiss talk of a spiritual struggle against the devil and demons (or *principalities and powers*) to the realm of mythology. The testimony of other ages and cultures (and even some in our own culture) strongly challenges that belief.

Personally, however, I believe far the greatest factor in the ambiguity we see all around is that God still values human freedom so highly. Even in bringing salvation to the world, he is very reluctant to overrule our free-will because it is one of the characteristics in which we most closely resemble him. Amazingly, he wishes to rule *in, with and through* us, rather than *over* us. Or to put it another way, he desires willing lovers who share his rule, rather than pressganged slaves who grudgingly obey his orders.

Sometimes God's passionate respect for human freedom can be frankly frustrating. I have often felt like saying, *"it would be so much simpler if you'd just come and put the world right and didn't try to involve us!"* But it seems that he is unwilling to impose salvation. He prefers volunteer co-workers to efficient robots. Although we joke about *'life's rich tapestry'*, God is working on something hand-crafted, not machine-made, employing all the creativity and skill he has invested in the human race. And the end result will be breathtaking.

## Where is it all heading?

God's ultimate goal for the world is to put everything right and bring everything together under his wise and loving rule. Look again at these words from The Message version of Ephesians 1:

*He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.*

*God... set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything.*

The end of the story is not in doubt: *no power exempt from his rule... forever*. This will not be the imposed rule of a dictatorial tyrant, but a Kingdom of willing subjects who are themselves 'a royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6) freely giving their allegiance to the King of Kings, before whom they gladly cast their crowns (Revelation 4:10). Perhaps this is why the ancient British idea of the High King appealed to C S Lewis in the *Chronicles of Narnia* and why Christ is dubbed 'High King of Heaven' in the old Irish hymn *Be Thou my Vision*. In this Kingdom we are all royalty, exercising creative dominion over parts of the High King's new Creation.

So intimate will be the relationship between the King and his subjects that the Book of Revelation talks more about the *marriage* of the Lamb, than his *coronation*. The Bible begins and ends with a wedding. In Genesis 2, God brings Eve to Adam, like the first Father walking his precious daughter to the altar, and they became one flesh. In Revelation, the Bride of Christ, restored and redeemed humanity, is brought to Christ at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. This is reflected in *Lord of the Rings* where the climax of the story in Gondor (before the focus returns to the Shire) is the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen, rather than his crowning. This scene clearly appealed to film-maker Peter Jackson too!\* The Bride in Revelation is a beautiful picture of everything restored, made whole, beautified and eternally united with Christ.

## Action

History is moving towards a big event we have barely touched on: the Second Coming of Christ. Thankfully I do not have space to get into the niceties of eschatology (the study of the last things). Let's just say that the Second Coming will signal final judgement (the righting of wrongs), full realisation of God's Kingdom, renewal of creation (*new heavens and new earth*) and the union of Christ and his Bride. Someone has said the world is '*heading for a wedding*'... and we are all invited!

1) **Get on board.** Classic evangelicalism has always pointed to the hope of a glorious future in God's Kingdom (and the undesirability of the alternative) as a good reason to throw in our lot with Christ. As we shall see in a minute, that is not a complete presentation of the Gospel, but it *is* perfectly valid. There is still only one way into the Kingdom of God – through repentance and faith. The call to get on board the *gospel train* is insistent and strong, as there is still the possibility of missing out:

*The Gospel train's at hand, be in time,  
Behold your station there, Jesus has paid your fare;  
Let's all engage in prayer: be in time, be in time!*

2) **Get perspective.** Similarly, generations of Christians have clung to future hope for consolation in difficult circumstances. When our present reality is tough – as it was for the African slaves on the plantations of colonial America, and as it is now for believers facing unimaginable hardship and persecution in Iraq or Syria – it is absolutely right to draw strength by contemplating the glorious day to which history is moving, when God will '*wipe away every tear from their eyes*' and '*there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*' (Revelation 21:4). Seeing present troubles in the light of eternity brings much needed perspective.

3) **Get involved.** However, God's invitation is not just to come and have our sins forgiven, to have the '*God-shaped hole*' in our lives filled, to reserve our ticket to heaven and wait out this life until we get there. He invites us to *live for his Kingdom*. It is a truism that we learn more theology from the songs we sing than the sermons we hear. One of the worship songs we flogged to death (and therefore internalised) when I was a teenager was Karen Lafferty's setting of Matthew 6:33,

*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness  
and all these things will be added unto you. ( Allelu, alleluia).*

Everyone needs a cause to live, work, suffer (and if necessary, die) for. You can put up with a lot of pain if you know it is in a good cause and contributing to something genuinely worthwhile. Jesus offers us the honour of joining him in his cause – which is to put everything right and bring everything together under his rule. Ultimately his Kingdom will triumph with or without our input, but incomprehensibly God chooses to involve us and give us a real part to play in the unfolding drama, so that at the end of the story (which C S Lewis famously pointed out will be only the beginning of the *real* story), we will share his joy in a fuller way.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that *Lord of the Rings* is not a straightforward allegory, but a more complex piece of literature, and that other things are going on for Tolkien (such as the passing of the age of the Elves) leaving the happiness of the book's ending still tinged with a strong sense of loss. For the same reason, the Christ-likeness of the characters mentioned is partial and only one aspect of the role each plays in the whole story.
2. If the terms 'mercy' and 'grace' are unfamiliar, I like this shorthand definition: '*justice is getting what you deserve; mercy is not getting what you deserve; grace is getting what you don't deserve*'.
3. 'Love & Mercy' (2014) directed by Bill Pohlad. Whilst not having any obvious theological intention, the whole film is itself a classic redemption story.
4. Although I have touched on the problem of suffering and unanswered prayer, for a fuller treatment I recommend Pete Greig's book *God on Mute* (David C Cook 2007).



# **Five Doctrines: So what?**

The title *'Five Doctrines you can't live without'* was intended to be light-hearted. In origin, it was a tongue-in-cheek attempt to pique my congregation's interest for a sermon series on 'systematic theology', by making what sounds like a self-contradictory statement – at least to twenty-first century ears. Surely the last thing the world needs right now is any more religious *doctrine* (or 'dogma' – to use an even less attractive, but nearly synonymous, word)? Oddly, this negative view of doctrine is not confined to secular atheists, but is also widely held within the section of the Christian community I most closely identify with (the charismatic or renewal-minded part). So in choosing this title I was lovingly pulling the leg of my own 'tribe', where the assumption is usually that an experience of God, not a doctrine, is the one thing you can't live without. The title also makes playful allusion to the fact that books of systematic theology, particularly in the German tradition, are notoriously long and weighty (in every sense), making this work look almost indecently brief. Admittedly the joke was not particularly funny, but behind it are some serious (even audacious) claims.

1. Christianity has a coherent view of the world which makes as much or more sense of reality than current atheistic ones. (In other words, the narrative we constantly hear that 'religion' is discredited, irrational and probably bad for you *'ain't necessarily so'* – to turn Gershwin's lyric on its head)!
2. There is a core of Christian belief we can't live without, in the sense that we will find it hard to navigate the world we now find ourselves in without this basic framework of understanding.
3. Although much more needs to be said, it is possible to express that core in five fairly simple ideas, each covered in a relatively short chapter.
4. That someone who left the world of serious theological study thirty years ago (with scarcely a backward look!) can now presume to articulate those ideas.

The onus is now on me to demonstrate the validity of those claims, hence this postscript: *'Five Doctrines – so what?'*!

## **The Meaning of Life**

Agonising about the 'meaning of life' may be an obsession of modern, affluent societies deserving of the satire of the Monty Python team or the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, but surely this remains a question we do all ask? It's hard to even raise 'first order questions' without immediately falling into the language of cliché, but isn't that language our inadequate attempt to express something we nonetheless feel deeply in a variety of situations? For instance, when suddenly and unexpectedly overcome by the beauty of a starry night or some other wonder of the natural world. Or when a piece of art, literature or music rips open part of our consciousness we had forgotten existed. Or when the nobility (or ugliness) we see in other human beings goes beyond any rational explanation. Major events in our lives, or the world around us, can also trigger deep questioning. I was recently in a group where we were invited to plot on a time-line key moments in our own lives, our immediate circle, and the wider world. As time was limited, I found myself treating this as a 'word association' or 'stream of consciousness' exercise, and was shocked to find how many of the events that immediately popped into my head involved death!

As well as those in my own family, the first three ‘*where-were-you-when...*’ public events to come to mind were: the deaths of John Lennon and Diana, Princess of Wales... and ‘9/11’. (I am too young to have any clear memories of Kennedy’s assassination, in case you were wondering!) These are just a few examples of the sort of circumstances in which we might find ourselves asking:

- Who or what am I?
- Does my life have a value or significance beyond itself?
- Am I here for a reason?
- Is there more to life than this?
- How will it all end – for me and the universe?

Let’s say quickly that Christian faith does not offer neatly-packaged, easy answers to any of these questions. That would trivialise both Christianity and the ‘existential journey’ every human being must go on. But for me Biblical faith provides a framework within which answers become possible, even though many of them will be provisional, painfully arrived at, framed with mystery, and needing to be revisited at different stages of life.

## Who am I?

The bigger and older our universe has become by scientific consensus, and the larger the human race has grown, both in fact and through our greater awareness of the billions with whom we share this planet, the more we can be tempted to doubt that *who I am* is of any importance at all. What are we but tiny dots of instantly forgettable insignificance in a vast unconcerned cosmos? Of course, we are not the first to have those thoughts. The Bible, though written thousands of years ago, is full of people who, in reflective moments, say similar things. ‘*All people are like grass... the grass withers and the flowers fall*’ (Isaiah 40:6-80). ‘*What are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow*’ (Psalm 144:3-4). And perhaps most shockingly: “*Meaningless! Meaningless!*” says the Teacher. “*Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). As the same wisdom teacher observes a few verses later, ‘*there is nothing new under the sun*’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9)!

The Biblical writers shared our unease at the smallness, brevity, and seeming insignificance of our lives. The difference was that they found theirs took on meaning in relation to God and his purpose. We may be satisfied to make sense of life in terms of our relationships, achievements, experiences and reputation, but all those things can prove perilously insubstantial. As I write, the TV news is once again full of sad stories of people whose homes have been devastated by floods, this time in the north of England. Strangely, we have turned Jesus’ parable about the man who built his house on sand, and met disaster in a violent storm, into a children’s lesson, complete with action song (‘*The foolish man built his house upon the sand... and the house on the sand fell flat*’)! However, like all the best story tellers, Jesus excelled at making complicated subjects sound simple. Surely this parable (Matthew 7:24-27) is really a profound commentary on the complex psychology of identity and self-esteem? Foundations are by definition subterranean and invisible. We think we know what our life is built on – until a sudden storm comes and reveals a different reality.

Which of the things we mould our identity around is not subject to shaking or complete loss? And if possessions, family, health or the admiration of others are taken away, how much will be left of the sense of self we had so carefully constructed?

Jesus' verdict is clear and compelling: the only foundation which will withstand any storm life can throw at us is God and his Word. We have to define ourselves in terms of a higher reality, not lesser ones. However, even the times of shaking or flood, when the weaknesses of our foundations are revealed, can be seen as God-given opportunities for repair work. In that regard, I love the story of William Walker, 'the diver who saved Winchester Cathedral', a wonderful example of British resourcefulness (and quirkiness!).

In the early 1900s, it was discovered that the east end of Winchester Cathedral was sinking and about to break away from the rest of the building. It appears the cathedral had been built on a peat bog, and although it had stood miraculously for 800 years, the inadequacy of its foundation was beginning to show and its structural integrity had become dangerously compromised. The normal remedy for problems like this is called 'underpinning'. You shore up the building, dig out small sections of the faulty footings, and replace them with solid stone. In this case, they had to dig down fifteen feet through the peat before they found a layer of gravel stable enough to base the underpinnings on. But that was not the only problem. The water table was so high that, as soon as they dug a hole, it filled with water to a depth of fifteen feet. What to do? They came up with the novel solution of employing a diver, called William Walker, who took bags of sand and cement under the water, in complete muddy darkness, and filled in the gap between the firm gravel and the base of the original cathedral walls. It took Walker six years, from 1906 to 1912, to complete the job and in the process he became something of a national hero, frequently being photographed in his old fashioned diving suit and domed helmet!

The moral of the story is obvious: it is never too late to replace a poor foundation with a sound one – to substitute rock for sand (or peat!). My argument here is that the 'five doctrines' provide the framework within which that underpinning can take place. What follows is a skeletal outline on which each individual will have to hang their own 'flesh'.

1. **Creation.** I am a creature and find my fullest identity in relation to my Creator. I have been made in his image and therefore share something of his infinite mystery. I am also unique because God never makes two things exactly the same (compare snowflakes, fingerprints, DNA etc.). Because I reflect his image, I was born to be creative (in whatever field), to choose, and to make a difference to the world. I also recognise the supreme value of his other image-bearers (my human neighbours) and the sacredness of the non-human creation. I can only be fully myself in proper relationship with all three (God, humanity and creation).
2. **Fall.** In common with all humanity, I am a fallen creature. I will therefore find brokenness at every level of who I am. I will have to face up to the hurt and harm I have caused others, as well as my potential for great evil as well as great good. Owing up to this 'dark side' will be uncomfortable, but I will draw strength and joy from the other four doctrines which affirm my fundamental goodness as God's

creature, and his redemptive plan to put right all that is twisted and broken in me and the rest of his creation.

3. **Incarnation.** In Christ I get the clearest picture of who God is, who I am (and will be), and how the two come together. The Incarnation is a 'game-changer' both in preparing the way for Redemption, and in demonstrating that my humanity is still a vessel through which God intends to reveal his glory.
4. **Redemption.** God's incarnate Son loves me and died for me! This has to be the ultimate validation of who I am and what I'm worth. All the old adages (clichés?) hold true. To quote just two: *'if I had been the only sinner in need of redemption, Christ would still have died for me'*; and *'it was not the nails, but love for me, which held him to the Cross'*.
5. **Kingdom of God.** My identity is now future-orientated. There is *'hope and a future'* for me and the world. Although *'it does not yet appear what we shall be'*, we know that *'when he appears we shall be like him'* (1 John 3:2). I am currently a work in progress, but the finished object will be amazing. Because my identity is secure in Christ, I am set free from introspective obsession with *who I am*, to live for the cause of his Kingdom!

## Why am I here?

Closely allied to the themes of identity, worth and meaning is the search for purpose, a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Christian tradition has tended to talk about *vocation* or *calling* rather than purpose, and to see human beings as having both a general, eternal calling common to all, and specific time-bound vocations differing from person to person. So is it possible to identify one supreme, universal purpose for which God made us, became a man, redeemed us, and that will be perfected in his coming Kingdom? Just as we can only find a secure identity by defining ourselves 'upwards' in terms of a greater reality (rather than 'downwards' in terms of lesser ones), our deepest reason for living can only be expressed in terms of an 'upwards' relationship: to know and love God.

## Worship is enough

St. Augustine began his hugely influential *Confessions* with these often quoted words, the highlighted phrase having found its way permanently into the liturgy of the church:

*Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and of Your wisdom there is no end. And man, being a part of Your creation, desires to praise You, man, who bears about with him his mortality, the witness of his sin, even the witness that You resist the proud, — yet man, this part of Your creation, desires to praise You. You move us to delight in praising You; **for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You.***<sup>1</sup>

Exactly 1250 years later, another much quoted theological source, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, begins with a very similar thought:

**Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?**

A. *Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*<sup>2</sup>

My earliest experiences of worship occurred in an unlikely setting – a long, narrow room above a grocery store in the small Kentish town where I attended secondary school. About 20 of us, mostly teenagers, used to gather there for three hours every Saturday evening to read the Bible, pray and most memorably, to sing songs (the rudimentary forerunners of the much more sophisticated contemporary worship music of today). Following a period of searching precipitated by an unhappy adolescence, I had recently embraced evangelical Christianity and assumed that the way I spent my Saturday evenings was normal! What's more, every day when I got home from school, I felt compelled to go out to the small orchard behind our house, so that I could be alone, and again sing simple songs of praise. During those times in the orchard, and when we came together on Saturday evenings, I frequently found I was *'lost in wonder, love and praise'* as Charles Wesley described it, occasionally losing all awareness of time and place in comparison to the wonder of God. In a way I had never known before *'earth was touching heaven and heaven touching earth'*.

Although I could not articulate it clearly at the time, I had discovered the primary reason I exist. Before he asks anything else from me, God desires a close, loving relationship. I was also learning that worship is a great healer. I came to Christ with a lot of pain and brokenness and in those early worship times a healing process began, which continues to this day. So a conviction was forming that worship is our primary calling: what we were created for, the reason Jesus became a man and died us, and our eternal destiny.

In the nature of things, created objects bring their makers acclaim. Great works of art are often linked to the person who created them: Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Sir Christopher Wren's *St. Paul's Cathedral* and so on. On a far grander scale, the whole universe reveals the mind and magnificence of its Creator.

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.* (Psalm 19:1-2)

As the pinnacle of Creation, it is fitting that human beings should bring the 'highest praise' as arguably, we are the only creatures who do so consciously and as an act of free-will. Augustine's concept of the creature delighting to praise its Creator may sound a little alien in today's world, but the Westminster Catechism's idea of *'enjoying God for ever'* feels very contemporary. The logic of this line of thinking leads me to a startling but firm conviction: if I never achieve or accomplish anything else but to know, love and worship God, my life will still have been worthwhile.

## My part in His story

I have been arguing that bringing glory to God is reason enough to justify our existence, but there's more: God dignifies each of us with a real and necessary part to play in the unfolding drama of the universe. Think of the *Five Doctrines* as the five acts of a play. Each builds on the preceding ones and progresses the story towards its conclusion. Only when all five are taken together do we have a complete account of reality, and each can only be understood in its full richness in the light of all the others. Critics of the Christian story will often take one 'act' in isolation and point out its obvious limitations, whilst completely ignoring the additional information supplied by the others. For instance, if you take *Creation* in isolation, it cannot account for the destructive elements in humanity and nature and so leads to the conclusion that God is either non-existent or cruel. But understood alongside the *Doctrines of Fall and Redemption*, everything begins to make a lot more sense. This is the Big Story we are all caught up in, whether we like it or not. And although there are many heartbreakingly tragic scenes, Dante was right to declare the whole piece a 'Divine Comedy', in the classical sense of a drama that builds to a happy ending, rather than a tragic one.

In keeping with our method of 'defining ourselves upward', we can only hope to come to an understanding of our individual story-lines in the context of this much bigger story. A closer look will reveal that the *Five Doctrines* are arranged in chronological, as well as theological, order. Where are we on that time-line? The theological reality of all five is very much part of our present experience, but in terms of strict chronology we inhabit the final 'act', the age of the coming of the Kingdom of God. In this imperfect analogy, God is clearly the author of the whole piece, but we are each given a real and significant role to play. Nor are we just acting out a pre-determined, unalterable story-line. Even Classical or Shakespearian actors bring a huge amount of their unique interpretation and life-experience to the characters they play. Many modern productions also include an element of improvisation where the players make up their own lines and actions, within predetermined limits. Although God has determined the overall plot and conclusion, we each have a contribution to make which will add colour and texture to the finished production. Second to finding our eternal purpose as lovers of God, discovering our own God-assigned role in the unfolding drama of time is hugely important. This will be our earthly vocation, the reason God has placed me, as opposed to everyone else, on earth '*for such a time as this*' (Esther 4:14).

## How will it all end?

A dear friend has just sent me, as a Christmas present, a book called *The Edge of the World*. '*But I regret,*' he remarked wryly, '*I do not have the latest info on the End of the World...!*' We are living in the final 'act', but I would not presume to say how far into it we are, or to re-ignite the heated eschatological (end times) debates of the last century. But we do have a deep-seated need to know, if not when, *how* it will end: well or badly, happily or unhappily? Are we living in a Divine Comedy or a Demonic Tragedy? It will be clear by now (and particularly from what was said about *Doctrine Five*) that I think we have good grounds to believe the former. My ears are still ringing with phrases from the most recent sermon I heard, preached by another good friend:

*'God's ways are always right and always good. He is very big and he knows what he's doing! He is very good at being God!'*

The belief that God is absolutely good (and I would not want to have any truck with one who was not) is enough to guarantee that *his story* will end well.

Perhaps because they make good 'sound-bites' or 'tweets', our culture loves its epigrams – pithy sayings that express an idea in a clever or amusing way. At best, they can encapsulate much wisdom in a few words; at worst, they are trite and annoying. One such saying (and I have the mug to prove it!) goes:

*'Everything will be OK in the end – and if it's not Ok, it's not the end!'*

Recently popularised in the film *'Best Exotic Marigold Hotel'*, and variously attributed to John Lennon or Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, this epigram has a bit of both. Outside of the Christian Story we have been telling, it seems to me an example of wild and groundless optimism; but within that framework, it becomes a profoundly theological statement. There is more than a hint of the older wisdom of Mother Julian of Norwich, quoted by T S Elliot in the *Four Quartets*:

*'All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.'*<sup>3</sup>

But the last word, in every sense, lies with the One apart from whom nothing makes any sense and there could be no hope of a happy ending, as recorded by another seer of visions:

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life." (Revelation 21:5-6)*

## Notes

1. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 1 (c. 397)
2. *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647)
3. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (c. 1395) and quoted in Elliot's *Little Gidding*