CHAPTER 9

The Teachings of Christianity

As has already been stressed, Christianity is not just a set of ideas. The central figure of Christianity is Jesus. It is possible to gain the impression that Christianity is simply a set of ideas or moral values. For this reason, this book has devoted a major section to setting out the importance of Jesus for Christianity. The relevant parts of this section (pp. 108–44) should be studied in depth.

Christianity is thus about a way of living, focusing on Jesus Christ. Part of that way of living is a way of understanding the world, including ways of understanding the nature of God, the origin and destiny of human beings, and what lies beyond death. Underlying and sustaining that Christian way of living is a set of controlling beliefs. To gain a proper understanding of Christianity, it is therefore vitally important to understand what Christians believe. The present chapter aims to provide an overview of the classic themes of the Christian faith.

It must be understood that it is impossible to give a full account of the leading themes of the Christian faith in the brief space possible in the present volume. The reader should consider what follows as being nothing more than an introduction. Christians have been exploring and debating matters of theology for some two thousand years, with the result that there is an enormously rich theological heritage awaiting exploration. The present chapter can only hope to introduce the main themes of Christian teaching; readers wishing to proceed further with their explorations and reflections should consult more detailed works, such as those noted at the end of this book.

In what follows we shall use the western form of the Apostles' Creed (see p. 147) as a basis for our analysis of the leading themes of the Christian faith. This creed has long been used as a convenient summary of the main points of Christian belief, particularly for new converts who wish to be baptized.

Notice how the creed is dominated by statements directly relating to Jesus. Of the twelve statements in the creed, six (2–7) relate directly to Jesus. Three (10–12) can be argued to state the Christian understanding of the significance of Jesus, in that forgiveness of sins and the hope of resurrection and eternal life are understood by Christians to be based directly on the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

The Apostles' Creed (Western Form)

The Creed is restated here for ease of reference.

1 I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
2 and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
3 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
4 suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended to hell;
5 on the third day he was raised from the dead;
6 he ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
7 from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
8 I believe in the Holy Spirit;
9 in the holy catholic church; the communion of saints;
10 the forgiveness of sins;
11 the resurrection of the body;
12 and eternal life.

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We have already considered the Christian understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus in some detail. As a result, the present chapter will pick up on those aspects of the creed which set out additional Christian teachings. Readers who wish to engage with Christian views about Jesus are referred to the substantial discussions of these issues earlier in this work (pp. 108–44).

The Christian Doctrine of God

Christianity affirms the existence of God. But which God? And what is this God like? The creeds of Christianity do more than simply state the belief that God exists; they begin to give shape and substance to a series of specifically Christian understandings about the nature and character of this

God. Of particular importance is the Christian affirmation that God is known through Jesus. As we have seen, one of the most fundamental Christian insights is that God is revealed in the person and work of Jesus (see pp. 116–18).

God as Father

The creed opens with an affirmation of belief in "God the Father." This statement is intended to affirm that Christians believe in a personal God, rather than in an abstract impersonal idea. This can be seen clearly from the language both the Old and New Testaments use about God. For example, both use strongly personal language in describing the nature and character of God. God can be spoken of as "faithful" and "loving" (words which immediately imply a personal relationship). Many Christian writers have pointed out that prayer seems to be modeled on the relationship between a child and a parent. Prayer expresses a gracious relationship which "is simply trust in a person whose whole dealing with us proves him worthy of trust" (John Oman). Furthermore, one of Paul's leading ideas concerning the effects of Christ's death on the cross is that it gives rise to "reconciliation." This profound theological idea is clearly modeled on human personal relationships. It implies that the transformation through faith of the relationship between God and sinful human beings is like the reconciliation of two persons – perhaps an alienated husband and wife.

To refer to God as "Father" is thus to affirm belief in a personal dynamic God, rather than an impersonal static divine force. But it also implies more than this. For example, it implies that we derive our origin from God, and that God cares for us in that way that human fathers are meant to care for their children.

The major medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas argues that the image of "God as Father" should be understood to mean that God is *like* a human father. In other words, God is *analogous* to a father. In some ways God is like a human father, and in others not. There are genuine points of similarity. God cares for us, as human fathers care for their children (note Matthew 7:7–11). God is the ultimate source of our existence, just as our fathers brought us into being. He exercises authority over us, as do human fathers. Equally, there are genuine points of dissimilarity. God is not a human being, for example.

The point that Aquinas is trying to make is clear. God reveals himself in images and ideas which tie in with our world of everyday existence – yet which do not reduce God to that everyday world. To say that "God is our father" is not to say that God is just yet another human father. Rather, it is to say that thinking about human fathers helps us think about God. They are analogies. Like all analogies, they break down at points. However, they are

still extremely useful and vivid ways of thinking about God, which allow us to use the vocabulary and images of our own world, to describe something which ultimately lies beyond that world.

Biblical models of God are firmly located in real life. Just as Jesus used real-life parables to make theological points, so the writers of Scripture use models drawn from the experiential world of ancient Palestine to allow us insights into the nature and purposes of God. In that this society was male-dominated, many of these models are male. For example, the idea of the authority of God can only be represented using male imagery – for example, that of a father, a judge, or a king. Nevertheless, other models are used. God is often compared to a (genderless) rock, for example, conveying the idea of strength, stability and permanence. Feminine imagery abounds to describe God's care and compassion for his people, which is often likened to the love of a mother for her children. Yet it is not the imagery, but what is being said about God, that is of fundamental importance.

Scripture affirms that kings, shepherds, and fathers in ancient Israelite society are appropriate models for God. But this use of male models does not mean that God is male, any more than the use of genderless models (such as a rock) means that God is impersonal, or the use of female models (such as mother) imply that God is female. To speak of God as father is to say that the role of the father in ancient Israel allows us insights into the nature of God. It is not to say that God *is* a male human being! Neither male nor female sexuality is to be attributed to God. Sexuality is an attribute of the created order, which cannot be assumed to correspond directly to any such polarity within the Godhead.

The Old Testament avoids attributing sexual functions to God, on account of the strongly pagan overtones of such associations. The Canaanite fertility cults emphasized the sexual functions of both gods and goddesses; the Old Testament refuses to endorse the idea that the gender or the sexuality of God is a significant matter. There is no need to revert to pagan ideas of gods and goddesses to recover the idea that God is neither masculine or feminine; those ideas are already firmly embedded in the Old and New Testaments.

We shall return to consider the idea of God as creator, already hinted at in the present discussion, in a later section of this chapter. Our attention now turns to one of the more challenging aspects of the Christian understanding of God – the doctrine of the Trinity.

God as Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most distinctive Christian teachings. It also one of the most difficult doctrines to understand. In what follows we shall attempt to present an outline sketch of the main features of this

teaching. The doctrine is not explicitly taught in the New Testament, although there are two passages which are certainly open to an explicitly Trinitarian interpretation: Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14.

STUDY PANEL 31

Trinitarian Hints in the New Testament?

Matthew 28:18–20
Then Jesus came to [the disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

2 Corinthians 13:14
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Both of the verses cited in Study Panel 31 have become deeply rooted in the Christian consciousness, the former on account of its baptismal associations, and the latter through the common use of the formula in Christian prayer and devotion. Yet these two verses, taken together or in isolation, can hardly be thought of as constituting a doctrine of the Trinity.

The biblical foundations of this doctrine are not, however, to be found in these two verses, but in the pervasive pattern of divine activity to which the New Testament bears witness. The Father is revealed in Christ through the Spirit. There is the closest of connections between the Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament writings. Time after time, New Testament passages link together these three elements as part of a greater whole. The totality of God's saving presence and power can only, it would seem, be expressed by involving all three elements (for example, see 1 Corinthians 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 1:21–2; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:20–22; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–6; 1 Peter 1:2).

The same Trinitarian structure can be seen in the Old Testament. Three major "personifications" of God can be discerned within its pages, which naturally lead on to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. These are:

1 *Wisdom.* This personification of God is especially evident in the Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiasticus. The attribute of divine wisdom is here treated as if it were a person (hence the idea of

"personification"), with an existence apart from, yet dependent upon, God. Wisdom (who is always treated as female, incidentally) is portrayed as active in creation, fashioning the world in her imprint (see Proverbs 1:20–3; 9:1–6; Job 28; Ecclesiasticus 24).

2 *The Word of God.* Here, the idea of God's speech or discourse is treated as an entity with an existence independent of God, yet originating with him. The Word of God is portrayed as going forth into the world to confront men and women with the will and purpose of God, bringing guidance, judgment and salvation (see Psalm 119:89; Psalm 147:15–20; Isaiah 55:10–11).

3 *The Spirit of God.* The Old Testament uses the phrase "the spirit of God" to refer to God's presence and power within his creation. The spirit is portrayed as being present in the expected Messiah (Isaiah 42:1–3), and as being the agent of a new creation which will arise when the old order has finally passed away (Ezekiel 36:26; 37:1–14).

These three "hypostatizations" of God (to use a Greek word in place of the English "personification") do not amount to a doctrine of the Trinity in the strict sense of the term. Rather, they point to a pattern of divine activity and presence in and through creation, in which God is both immanent and transcendent. A purely unitarian conception of God proved inadequate to contain this dynamic understanding of God. And it is this pattern of divine activity which is expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in Scripture, and continued in Christian experience. This is not to say that Scripture contains a doctrine of the Trinity; rather, Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a Trinitarian manner.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity is best seen as organically related to the evolution of the Christian understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus (see pp. 115–23; 126–34). It became increasingly clear that there was a consensus to the effect that Jesus was "of the same substance" (Greek: *homoousios*) as God, rather than just "of similar substance" (Greek: *homoiousios*). But if Jesus was God, in any meaningful sense of the word, what did this imply about God? If Jesus was God, were there now two Gods? Or was a radical reconsideration of the nature of God appropriate? Historically, it is possible to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely linked with the development of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. The more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God.

The starting point for Christian reflections on the Trinity is, as we have

seen, the New Testament witness to the presence and activity of God in Christ and through the Spirit. For Irenaeus, the whole process of salvation, from its beginning to its end, bore witness to the action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Irenaeus made use of a term which features prominently in future discussion of the Trinity: "the economy of salvation." That word "economy" needs clarification. The Greek word *oikonomia* basically means "the way in which one's affairs are ordered" (the relation to the modern sense of the word will thus be clear). For Irenaeus, the "economy of salvation" means "the way in which God has ordered the salvation of humanity in history."

At the time, Irenaeus was under considerable pressure from Gnostic critics, who argued that the creator god was quite distinct from (and inferior to!) the redeemer god (see pp. 11–12). In the form favored by Marcion, this idea took the following form: the Old Testament god is a creator god, and totally different from the redeemer god of the New Testament. As a result, the Old Testament should be shunned by Christians, who should concentrate their attention upon the New Testament. Irenaeus vigorously rejected this idea. He insisted that the entire process of salvation, from the first moment of creation to the last moment of history, was the work of the one and the same God. There was a single economy of salvation, in which the one God – who was both creator and redeemer – was at work to redeem his creation.

In his *Demonstration of the Preaching of the Apostles*, Irenaeus insisted upon the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son, and Spirit within the economy of salvation. He affirmed his faith in:

> God the Father uncreated, who is uncontained, invisible one God, creator of the universe . . . and the Word of God, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who . . . in the fulness of time, to gather all things to himself, became a human among humans, to . . . destroy death, bring life, and achieve fellowship between God and humanity . . . And the Holy Spirit . . . was poured out in a new way on our humanity to make us new throughout the world in the sight of God.

This passage brings out clearly the idea of an economic Trinity – that is to say, an understanding of the nature of the Godhead in which each person is responsible for an aspect of the economy of salvation. Far from being a rather pointless piece of theological speculation, the doctrine of the Trinity is grounded directly in the complex human experience of redemption in Christ, and is concerned with the explanation of this experience.

By the second half of the fourth century, the debate concerning the relation of the Father and Son gave every indication of having been settled.

The recognition that Father and Son were "of one being" settled the Arian controversy, and established a consensus within the church over the divinity of the Son. But further theological construction was necessary. What was the relation of the Spirit to the Father? and to the Son? There was a growing consensus that the Spirit could not be omitted from the Godhead. The Cappadocian fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea, defended the divinity of the Spirit in such persuasive terms that the foundation was laid for the final element of Trinitarian theology to be put in its place. The divinity and co-equality of Father, Son, and Spirit had been agreed; it now remained to develop Trinitarian models to allow this understanding of the Godhead to be visualized.

In general, eastern theology tended to emphasize the distinct individuality of the three persons, and safeguard their unity by stressing the fact that both the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father. The relation between the persons is grounded in what those persons *are*. Thus the relation of the Son to the Father is defined in terms of "being begotten" and "sonship." Augustine moves away from this approach, preferring to treat the persons in *relational* terms. The western approach was thus more marked by its tendency to begin from the unity of God, especially in the work of revelation and redemption, and to interpret the relation of the three persons in terms of their mutual fellowship.

The eastern approach might seem to suggest that the Trinity consists of three independent agents, doing quite different things. This possibility was excluded by two later developments, which are usually referred to by the terms "mutual interpenetration (*perichoresis*)" and "appropriation." Although these ideas find their full development at a later stage in the development of the doctrine, they are unquestionably hinted at in both Irenaeus and Tertullian, and find more substantial expression in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. We may usefully consider both these ideas at this stage.

1 *Perichoresis.* This Greek term, which is often found in either its Latin (*circumincessio*) or English ("mutual interpenetration") forms, came into general use in the sixth century. It refers to the manner in which the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another. The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of "a community of being," in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.

2 *Appropriation.* The modalist heresy argued that God could be considered as existing in different "modes of being" at different points in the economy of salvation, so that, at one point, God existed as Father and

created the world; at another God existed as Son and redeemed it. The doctrine of appropriation insists that the works of the Trinity are a unity; every person of the Trinity is involved in every outward action of the Godhead. Thus Father, Son, and Spirit are all involved in the work of creation, which is not to be viewed as the work of the Father alone. For example, Augustine of Hippo pointed out that the Genesis creation account speaks of God, the Word and the Spirit (Genesis 1:1–3), thus indicating that all three persons of the Trinity were present and active at this decisive moment in salvation history.

A representation of the Trinity found in a collection of Latin antiphons, produced in Siena around 1480. The three persons of the Trinity are here depicted as three "faces" of the one God. The divine unity is emphasized by the single figure sitting upon the throne. Note also the orb and scepter, which have been placed in the hands of God as symbols of divine authority. Christie's Images.

Yet it is appropriate to think of creation as the work of the Father. Despite the fact that all three persons of the Trinity are implicated in creation, it is properly seen as the distinctive action of the Father. Similarly, the entire Trinity is involved in the work of redemption. It is, however, appropriate to speak of redemption as being the distinctive work of the Son.

Taken together, the doctrines of *perichoresis* and appropriation allow us to think of the Godhead as a "community of being," in which all is shared, united, and mutually exchanged. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three isolated and diverging compartments of a Godhead, like three subsidiary components of an international corporation. Rather, they are differentiations within the Godhead, which become evident within the economy of salvation and the human experience of redemption and grace. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that, beneath the surface of the complexities of the history of salvation and our experience of God lies one God, and one God only.

One of the most significant events in the early history of the church was agreement throughout the Roman Empire, both east and west, on the Nicene Creed. This document was intended to bring doctrinal stability to the church in a period of considerable importance in its history. Part of that agreed text referred to the Holy Spirit "proceeding from the Father." By the ninth century, however, the western church routinely altered this phrase, speaking of the Holy Spirit "proceeding from the Father *and from the Son*" (my emphasis). The Latin term *filioque* ("and from the Son") has since come to refer to this addition, now widely accepted within the western church, and the theology which it expresses. This idea of a "double procession" of the Holy Spirit was a source of intensive irritation to Greek Christians. Not only did it raise serious theological difficulties for them; it also involved tampering with the supposedly inviolable text of the creeds. Many scholars see this bad feeling as contributing to the split between the eastern and western churches, which took place around 1054 (see p. 261).

The *filioque* debate is of importance, both as a theological issue in itself, and also as a matter of some importance in the contemporary relations between the eastern and western churches. We therefore propose to explore the issues in some detail. The basic issue at stake is whether the Spirit may be said to proceed *from the Father alone*, or *from the Father and the Son*. The former is associated with the eastern church, and is given its most weighty exposition in the writings of the Cappadocian fathers; the latter is associated with the western church, and particularly with Augustine.

The Greek patristic writers insisted that there was only one source of being within the Trinity. The Father alone was the sole and supreme cause

of all things, including the Son and the Spirit within the Trinity. The Son and the Spirit derive from the Father, but in different manners. In searching for suitable terms to express this relationship, theologians eventually fixed on two quite distinct images: the Son is *begotten* of the Father, while the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father. These two terms are intended to express the idea that both Son and Spirit derive from the Father, but are derived in different ways. The vocabulary is clumsy, reflecting the fact that the Greek words involved (*gennesis* and *ekporeusis*) are difficult to translate into modern English.

To assist in understanding this complex process, the Greek fathers used two images. The Father pronounces his word; at the same time as he utters this word, he breathes out in order to make this word capable of being heard and received. The imagery used here, which is strongly grounded in the biblical tradition, is that of the Son as the Word of God, and the Spirit as the breath of God. An obvious question arises here: why should the Cappadocian fathers, and other Greek writers, spend so much time and effort on distinguishing Son and Spirit in this way? The answer is important. A failure to distinguish the ways in which Son and Spirit derive from the one and the same Father would lead to God having two sons, which would have raised insurmountable problems.

Within this context, it is unthinkable that the Holy Spirit should proceed from the Father and the Son. Why? Because it would totally compromise the principle of the Father as the sole origin and source of all divinity. It would amount to affirming that there were two sources of divinity within the one Godhead, with all the internal contradictions and tensions that this would generate. If the Son were to share in the exclusive ability of the Father to be the source of all divinity, this ability would no longer be exclusive. For this reason, the Greek church regarded the western idea of a "double procession" of the Spirit with something approaching total disbelief.

Augustine, however, argued that the Spirit had to be thought of as proceeding from the Son. One of his main proof texts was John 20:22, in which the risen Christ is reported as having breathed upon his disciples, and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." In particular, Augustine developed the idea of relation within the Godhead, arguing that the persons of the Trinity are defined by their relations to one another. The Spirit is thus to be seen as the relation of love and fellowship between the Father and Son, a relation which Augustine believed to be foundational to the Fourth Gospel's presentation of the unity of will and purpose of Father and Son.

We can summarize the basic differences between these two approaches to the Trinity as follows. The Greek intention was to safeguard the unique position of the Father as the sole source of divinity. In that both the Son

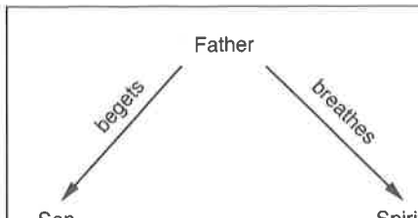

Figure 9.1 The eastern approach to the Trinity

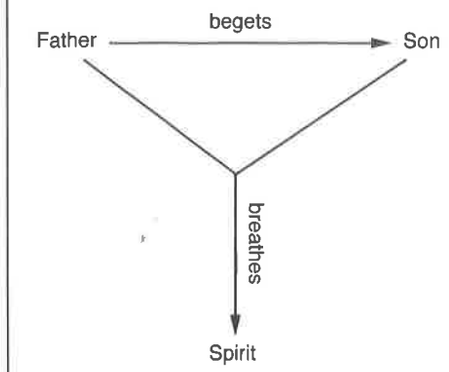

Figure 9.2 The western approach to the Trinity

and Spirit derive from him, although in different but equally valid manners, their divinity is in turn safeguarded. To the Greeks, the Latin approach seemed to introduce two separate sources of divinity into the Godhead, and to weaken the vital distinction between Son and Spirit. The Son and Spirit are understood to have distinct, yet complementary roles; whereas the western tradition sees the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ. Indeed, a number of modern writers from this tradition, such as the Russian writer Vladimir Lossky, have criticized the western approach. In his essay "The Procession of the Holy Spirit," Lossky argues that the western approach inevitably depersonalizes the Spirit, leads to a misplaced emphasis upon the person and work of Christ, and reduces the Godhead to an impersonal principle.

The Latin intention was to ensure that the Son and Spirit were adequately distinguished from one another, yet shown to be mutually related to one another. The strongly relational approach adopted to the idea of "person" made it inevitable that the Spirit would be treated in this way. Sensitive to the Greek position, later Latin writers stressed that they did not regard their approach as presupposing two sources of divinity in the Godhead. The Council of Lyons stated that "the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, yet not as from two origins but as from one origin." However, the

doctrine remains a source of contention, which is unlikely to be removed in the foreseeable future.

The differences between these two conceptions of the Trinity can be illustrated diagrammatically (see p. 199):

God the Creator

One important aspect of the Christian understanding of God focuses on God's activity in the work of creation. The doctrine of God as creator has its foundations firmly laid in the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 1, 2). In the history of theology, the doctrine of God the creator has often been linked with the authority of the Old Testament. The continuing importance of the Old Testament for Christianity is often held to be grounded in the fact that the god of which it speaks is the same god to be revealed in the New Testament. The creator and redeemer god are one and the same. In the case of Gnosticism, a vigorous attack was mounted on both the authority of the Old Testament, and the idea that God was creator of the world.

For Gnosticism, in most of its significant forms, a sharp distinction was to be drawn between the God who redeemed humanity from the world, and a somewhat inferior deity (often termed "the demiurge") who created that world in the first place. The Old Testament was regarded by the Gnostics as dealing with this lesser deity, whereas the New Testament was concerned with the redeemer God. As such, belief in God as creator and in the authority of the Old Testament came to be interlinked at an early stage. Of the early writers to deal with this theme, Irenaeus of Lyons is of particular importance.

Irenaeus argued that the Christian doctrine of creation affirmed the basic goodness of the created order. Whereas Gnostic writers argued that the material world was evil, Irenaeus insisted that it remained the good creation of God. The development of this insight within early Christianity is especially associated with Celtic Christianity (see pp. 257–60), which was noted for its emphasis on the goodness of creation. The strongholds of Celtic Christianity tended to be on the tiny islands off the Scottish mainland, or in isolated regions of Ireland. These contexts brought the Celtic Christians into close contact with nature, and led to a deep appreciation of the wonder of nature. Celtic manuscripts, including biblical and liturgical texts, often incorporated ornamental designs based on animals, plants, foliage, and fruit. However, perhaps the most familiar affirmation of the goodness of the creation is found in the famous "Canticle of the Sun" of Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), which uses the language of "brother" and "sister" to refer to elements of the creation.

Francis of Assisi on the Creation

Francis's *Canticle of the Sun*, probably written in 1225, represents an important affirmation of a positive attitude towards the creation, typical of Franciscan spirituality. Note especially the underlying theology of providence, in which the benefit of each aspect of creation for humanity is identified. The most famous feature of the canticle is its use of the terms "brother" and "sister" to refer to various aspects of the created order. Traditional English translations of this familiar poem have been heavily influenced by the need to ensure rhyming. My prose translation of the original Italian ignores such considerations in order to convey the sense of the poem. The lines of the original have been retained.

The Praises of the Creatures

Most high, all-powerful and good Lord!
Tơ you are due the praises, the glory, the honor and every blessing,
To you only, O highest one, are they due
and no human being is worthy to speak of you.

Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures
especially by brother sun
by whom we are lightened every day
for he is fair and radiant with great splendor
and bears your likeness, O highest one.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister moon and the stars
you have set them in heaven, precious, fair and bright.

Be praised, my Lord, by brother wind
and by air and cloud and sky and every weather
through whom you give life to all your creatures.

Be praised, my Lord, by sister water
for she is useful and humble and precious and chaste.

By praised, my Lord, by brother fire
by him we are lightened at night
and he is fair and cheerful and sturdy and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, by our sister, mother earth
she sustains and governs us
and brings forth many fruits and coloured flowers and plants.

STUDY PANEL 32

Study Panel 32 Continued

Be praised, my Lord, by those who have been pardoned by your love
and who bear infirmity and tribulation;
blessed are those who suffer them in peace
for by you, O highest one, they shall be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, by our sister, physical death
From whom no one who lives can escape
woe to those who die in mortal sin
but blessed are those who are found in your most holy will
for the second death can do them no harm.

May I bless and praise you, my Lord, and give you thanks and serve
you with great humility.

Another debate of importance within early Christianity centered on the question of whether creation was *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing"). In one of his dialogues, the classical Greek philosopher Plato developed the idea that the world was made out of pre-existent matter, which was fashioned into the present form of the world. This idea was taken up by most Gnostic writers, who were here followed by a few Christian theologians such as Theophilus and Justin Martyr. According to these writers, God created the world out of pre-existent matter (that is, material which was already to hand), which was then shaped into the specific shape of the world as we know it in the act of creation. In other words, creation was not *ex nihilo*; rather, it was an act of construction, on the basis of material which was already to hand, in much the same way as one might speak of someone "creating" a house from brick or stone.

On the basis of this approach, the presence of evil in the world was thus to be explained on the basis of the intractability of this pre-existent matter. God's options in creating the world were limited by the poor quality of the material available. The presence of evil or defects within the world are thus not to be ascribed to God, but to deficiencies in the material from which the world was constructed. This view gained widespread acceptance within Gnostic circles.

However, the growing conflict between early Christian writers and Gnosticism forced reconsideration of this specific issue. In part, the idea of creation from pre-existent matter was seen as discredited by its Gnostic associations; in part, it was called into question by an increasingly sophisticated reading of the Old Testament creation narratives. Writers such as Theophilus of Antioch insisted upon the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*,

which may be regarded as gaining the ascendency from the end of the second century onwards. From that point onwards, it became the received doctrine within the church.

Implications of the Doctrine of Creation

The doctrine of God as creator has several major implications, of which some may be noted here.

1 A distinction must be drawn between God and the creation. A major theme of Christian theology from the earliest of times has been to resist the temptation to merge the creator and the creation. The theme is clearly stated in Paul's letter to the Romans, the opening chapter of which criticizes the tendency to reduce God to the level of the world. According to Paul, there is a natural human tendency, as a result of sin, to serve "created things rather than the creator" (Romans 1:25). A central task of a Christian theology of creation is to distinguish God from the creation, while at the same time to affirm that it is God's creation.

This process may be seen at work in the writings of Augustine; it is of considerable importance in the writings of reformers such as Calvin, who were concerned to forge a world-affirming spirituality in response to the general monastic tendency to renounce the world, evident in writings such as Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, with its characteristic emphasis upon the "contempt of the world." There is a dialectic in Calvin's thought between the world, as the creation of God himself, and the world as the fallen creation. In that it is God's creation, it is to be honored, respected, and affirmed; in that it is a fallen creation, it is to be criticized with the object of redeeming it. The doctrine of creation thus leads to a critical world-affirming spirituality, in which the world is affirmed, without falling into the snare of treating it as if it were God.

The importance of this point has been stressed by more recent writers, including Lesslie Newbigin. Elements of creation can easily become demonic, by being invested with the authority and power which properly belong to God alone.

> They can come to usurp the place to which they have no right, the place which belongs to Christ and to him alone. They can, as we say, become absolutized, and then they become demonic. [The state] power ordained by God in Romans 13 becomes the Beast of Revelation. The Torah, that loving instruction which God gives his people and the beauty of which is celebrated in Psalm 119, becomes a tyrant from which Christ has to deliver us.

A proper doctrine of creation prevents this process of demonization from taking place, by insisting that creational elements may be good, but are

never divine. It thus provides a framework by which we are protected against the usurpation of divine authority by any aspect of the creation – whether it is a person, a set of values, or an institution.

2 Creation implies God's authority over and possession of the world. As the Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper once famously affirmed, "there is not one square inch of creation about which Jesus Christ does not say: that is *mine*." A characteristic biblical emphasis is that the creator has authority over the creation. Humans are thus regarded as part of that creation, with special functions within it. The doctrine of creation leads to the idea of *human stewardship of the creation*, which is to be contrasted with a secular notion of *human ownership of the world*. The creation is not ours; we hold it in trust for God. We are meant to be the stewards of God's creation, and are responsible for the manner in which we exercise that stewardship. This insight is of major importance in relation to ecological and environmental concerns, in that it provides a theoretical foundation for the exercise of human responsibility towards the planet.

Recognition that the world belongs to God thus has important consequences for understanding our own responsibilities within that world. We have been placed within God's creation to tend it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). We may be superior to the remainder of that creation, and exercise authority over it (Psalm 8:4–8) – but we remain under the authority of God, and responsible to him for the way in which we treat his creation. We are the stewards, not the owners, of creation. We hold it in trust. There is a growing realization today that past generations have seriously abused that trust. They have exploited the creation and its resources. There is a real danger that we shall spoil what God so wonderfully created.

Fortunately, there has been a growing awareness recently of the need to take a more responsible attitude towards creation. Reflecting on our responsibilities as stewards of God's creation is the first step in undoing the harm done by past generations. It matters to God that vast areas of our world are made uninhabitable through nuclear or toxic chemical waste. It matters that the delicate balance of natural forces is disturbed by human carelessness. Sin affects the way we treat the environment as much as it does our attitude towards God, other people, and society as a whole. This article of the creed is the basis of a new – and overdue – attitude towards creation.

3 The doctrine of God as creator implies the goodness of creation. Throughout the first biblical account of creation, we encounter the affirmation "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10; 18; 21; 25; 31). (The only thing that is "not good" is that Adam is alone. Humanity is created as a social being, and is meant to exist in relation with others.) There is no place in Christian theology for the Gnostic or dualist idea of the world as an inherently evil place. As we shall explore elsewhere, even though the world

is fallen through sin, it remains God's good creation, and capable of being redeemed.

This is not to say that the creation is presently perfect. An essential component of the Christian doctrine of sin is the recognition that the world has departed from the trajectory upon which God placed it in the work of creation. It has become deflected from its intended course. It has fallen from the glory in which it was created. The world as we see it is not the world as it was intended to be. The existence of human sin, evil, and death are themselves tokens of the extent of the departure of the created order from its intended pattern. For this reason, most Christian reflections on redemption include the idea of some kind of restoration of creation to its original integrity, in order that God's intentions for his creation might find fufillment. Affirming the goodness of creation also avoids the suggestion, unacceptable to most theologians, that God is responsible for evil. The constant biblical emphasis upon the goodness of creation is a reminder that the destructive force of sin is not present in the world by God's design or permission.

4 The doctrine of creation has important implications for our understanding of ourselves, and particularly our place within creation. Human beings are created in the image of God. This insight, central to any Christian doctrine of human nature, is of major importance as an aspect of the doctrine of creation itself. The divine intention in creating humanity is that they should exist in a relationship with him. Until and unless that relationship exists, humanity will not fulfill its true intention, and will remain unfulfilled. "You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (Augustine of Hippo).

At a more existential level, the doctrine has important implications for our attitude toward existing in the world. The doctrine of creation allows us to feel at home in the world. It reminds us that we, like the rest of creation, were fashioned by God. We are here because God wants us to be here. We are not alone, but are in the very presence of the God who made and owns everything. We are in the presence of a friend, who knows us and cares for us. Behind the apparently faceless universe lies a person.

Yet this attitude of "being at home in the world" needs to be qualified. We are to see ourselves as passing through the world, not belonging there permanently. We are, so to put it, tourists rather than residents. In his *Geneva Catechism*, Calvin suggests that we should "earn to pass through this world as though it is a foreign country, treating all earthly things lightly and declining to set our hearts upon them."

Perhaps one of the finest statements of this attitude may be found in the sermon of the eighteenth-century American writer Jonathan Edwards entitled "The Christian Pilgrim", in which he affirms that "It was never designed by God that this world should be our home." Speaking with

the eighteenth-century situation in New England in mind, Edwards declared:

> Though surrounded with outward enjoyments, and settled in families with desirable friends and relations; though we have companions whose society is delightful, and children in whom we see many promising qualifications; though we live by good neighbors and are generally beloved where known; yet we ought not to take our rest in these things as our portion . . . We ought to possess, enjoy and use them, with no other view but readily to quit them, whenever we are called to it, and to change them willingly for heaven.

5 The doctrine of creation also calls into question the western distinction between "sacred" and "secular." To describe one area of our lives (such as leading a Sunday School) as "sacred" and another (such as working in an office) as "secular" implies that only part of our lives is dedicated to God, and that only part of God's creation can be said to be his. This attitude is particularly associated with the Protestant reformers, who supplemented the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" with the idea of "being called to serve God in the world." All Christians were called to be priests – and that calling extended to the everyday world. Christians were called to be priests to the world, purifying and sanctifying its everyday life from within. Luther stated this point succinctly, when commenting on Genesis 13:13: "what seem to be secular works are actually the praise of God and represent an obedience which is well pleasing to him." Luther even extolled the religious value of housework, declaring that although "it had no obvious appearance of holiness, yet these very household chores are more to be valued than all the works of monks and nuns."

Underlying this new attitude is the notion of the "calling." God calls his people not just to faith, but to express that faith in quite definite areas of life in the world. One is called, in the first place, to be a Christian, and in the second, to live out that faith in a quite definite sphere of activity within the world. Whereas medieval monastic spirituality generally regarded the idea of "vocation" as a calling *out* of the world into the seclusion and isolation of the monastery, Luther and Calvin understood it as a calling *into* the everyday world. The doctrine of creation thus leads to a strong work ethic, in the sense that work in the world can be seen as work for God.

Jesus

The area of Christian theology traditionally known as "Christology" deals with the person of Jesus Christ. This has already been dealt with in some detail in our analysis of the significance of Jesus in the New Testament

(pp. 108–23), and the elaboration of these views in the Christian tradition (pp. 124–44). You are referred to these major sections for further discussion.

The Holy Spirit

The Christian interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit has perceptibly grown in the last hundred years, on account of the rise of the charismatic movement (see pp. 334–6). It is important that we begin our discussion of this area of Christian teaching by noting the difficulties of translating the biblical words for "spirit." The English language uses at least three words – "wind," "breath," and "spirit" – to translate the one Hebrew word *ruach*. This important Hebrew word has a depth of meanings which it is virtually impossible to reproduce in English. *Ruach*, traditionally translated simply as "spirit," is associated with a range of meanings, each of which casts some light on the complex associations of the Christian notion of the Holy Spirit.

1 *Spirit as wind.* The Old Testament writers are careful not to identify God with the wind, and thus reduce God to the level of a natural force. Nevertheless, a parallel is drawn between the power of the wind, and that of God. To speak of God as spirit is to remind Israel of the power and dynamism of the God who had called Israel out of Egypt. This image of the spirit as redemptive power is perhaps stated in its most significant form in the account of the Exodus from Egypt, in which a powerful wind divides the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21). Here, the idea of *ruach* conveys both the power and the redemptive purpose of God.

The image of the wind also allowed the pluriformity of human experience of God to be accounted for, and visualized in a genuinely helpful manner. The Old Testament writers were conscious of experiencing the presence and activity of God in two quite distinct manners. Sometimes God was experienced as a judge, one who condemned Israel for its waywardness; yet at other times, God is experienced as one who refreshes Israel, like water in a dry land. The image of the wind conveyed both these ideas in a powerful manner. It must be remembered that Israel bordered the Mediterranean Sea on the west, and the great deserts on the east. When the wind blew from the east, it was experienced as a mist of fine sand which scorched vegetation and parched the land. Travellers' accounts of these winds speak of their remarkable force and power. Even the light of the sun is obliterated by the sand-storm thrown up by the wind. This wind was seen by the biblical writers as a model for the way in which God demonstrated the finitude and transitoriness of the creation. "The grass

withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them" (Isaiah 40:7).

The western winds, however, were totally different. In the winter, the west and south-west winds brought rain to the dry land as they blew in from the sea. In the summer, the western winds did not bring rain, but coolness. The intensity of the desert heat was mitigated through these gentle cooling breezes. And just as this wind brought refreshment, by moistening the dry ground in winter and cooling the heat of the day in summer, so God was understood to refresh human spiritual needs. In a series of powerful images, God is compared by the Old Testament writers to the rain brought by the western wind (Hosea 6:3), refreshing the land.

2 *Spirit as breath.* The idea of spirit is associated with life. When God created Adam, God breathed into him the breath of life, as a result of which he became a living being (Genesis 2:7). The basic difference between a living and a dead human being is that the former breathes, and the latter does not. This led to the idea that life was dependent upon breath. God is the one who breathes the breath of life into empty shells, and brings them to life. God brought Adam to life by breathing into him. The famous vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1–14) also illustrates this point: can these dry bones live? The bones only come to life when breath enters into them (Ezekiel 37:9–10). The model of God as spirit thus conveys the fundamental insight that God is the one who gives life, even the one who is able to bring the dead back to life. It is thus important to note that *ruach* is often linked in the Old Testament with God's work of creation (e.g., Genesis 1:2; Job 26:12–13; 33:4; Psalm 104:27–31), even if the precise role of the Spirit is left unspecified. There is clearly an association between "Spirit" and the giving of life through creation.

3 *Spirit as charism.* The technical term "charism" refers to the "filling of an individual with the spirit of God," by which the person in question is enabled to perform tasks which would otherwise be impossible. In the Old Testament, the gift of wisdom is often portrayed as a consequence of the endowment of the Spirit (Genesis 41:38–9; Exodus 28:3; 35:31; Deuteronomy 34:9). At times, the Old Testament attributes gifts of leadership or military prowess to the influence of the Spirit (Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14, 15). However, the most pervasive aspect of this feature of the Spirit relates to the question of prophecy. The Old Testament does not offer much in the way of clarification concerning the manner in which the prophets were inspired, guided or motivated by the Holy Spirit. In the pre-exilic era, prophecy is often associated with ecstatic experiences of God, linked with wild behavior (1 Samuel 10:6; 19:24). Nevertheless, the activity of prophecy gradually became associated with the message rather than the behavior of the prophet. The prophet's credentials rest upon an endowment with the Spirit (Isaiah 61:1; Ezekiel 2:1–2; Micah 3:8; Zechariah 7:12), which authenticates the

prophet's message – a message which is usually described as "the word of the Lord."

The Debate over the Divinity of the Holy Spirit

The early church, with occasional exceptions, does not appear to have devoted much attention to clarifying its teaching on the Holy Spirit. The relative absence of extensive discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the first three centuries reflects the fact that theological debate centered elsewhere. The Greek patristic writers had, in their view, more important things to do than worry about the Spirit, when vital political and Christological debates were raging all around them. This point was made by the fourth-century writer Amphilochius of Iconium, who pointed out that the Arian controversy had first to be resolved before any serious discussion over the status of the Holy Spirit could get under way. The theological development of the early church was generally a response to public debates; once a serious debate got under way, doctrinal clarification was the inevitable outcome.

The debate in question initially centered upon a group of writers known as the *pneumatomachoi* or "opponents of the spirit," who argued that neither the person nor the works of the Spirit were to be regarded as having the status or nature of a divine person. In response to this writers such as Athanasius and Basil of Caesarea made an appeal to the formula which had by then become universally accepted for baptism. Since the time of the New Testament (see Matthew 28:18–20) Christians were baptized in the name of "the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Athanasius argued that this had momentous implications for an understanding of the status of the person of the Holy Spirit. In his *Letter to Serapion*, Athanasius declared that the baptismal formula clearly pointed to the Spirit sharing the same divinity as the Father and the Son. This argument eventually prevailed.

However, patristic writers were hesitant to speak openly of the Spirit as "God," in that this practice was not sanctioned by Scripture – a point discussed at some length by Basil of Caesarea in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (374–5). Even as late as 380, Gregory of Nazianzen conceded that many orthodox Christian theologians were uncertain as to whether to treat the Holy Spirit "as an activity, as a creator, or as God." This caution can be seen in the final statement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, formulated by a Council meeting at Constantinople in 381. The Spirit was here described, not as God, but as "the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified with the Father and Son." The language is unequivocal; the Spirit is to be treated as having the same dignity and rank as the Father and Son, even if the term "God" is not to be used explicitly. The precise relation of the Spirit to Father and Son would

subsequently become an item of debate in its own right, as the *filioque* controversy indicates (see pp. 197–200).

The following considerations seem to have been of decisive importance in establishing the divinity of the Holy Spirit during the later fourth century. First, as Gregory of Nazianzen stressed, Scripture applied all the titles of God to the Spirit, with the exception of "unbegotten." Gregory drew particular attention to the use of the word "holy" to refer to the Spirit, arguing that this holiness did not result from any external source, but was the direct consequence of the nature of the Spirit. The Spirit was to be considered as the one who sanctifies, rather than the one who requires to be sanctified.

Second, the functions which are specific to the Holy Spirit establish the divinity of the Spirit. Didymus the Blind (died 398) was one of many writers to point out that the Spirit was responsible for the creating, renewing and sanctification of God's creatures. Yet how could one creature renew or sanctify another creature? Only if the Spirit was divine could sense be made of these functions. If the Holy Spirit performed functions which were specific to God, it must follow that the Holy Spirit shares in the divine nature. For Basil, the Spirit makes creatures to be like God and to be god – and only one who is divine can bring this about.

Third, the reference to the Spirit in the baptismal formula of the church was interpreted as supporting the divinity of the Spirit. Baptism took place in the name of the "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:17–20). Athanasius and others argued that this formula established the closest of connections between the three members of the Trinity, making it impossible to suggest that the Father and Son shared in the substance of the Godhead, while the Spirit was nothing other than a creature. In a similar way, Basil of Caesarea argued that the baptismal formula clearly implied the inseparability of Father, Son, and Spirit. This verbal association, according to Basil, clearly had considerable theological implications.

The admission of the full divinity of the Spirit thus took place at a relatively late stage in the development of patristic theology. In terms of the logical advance of doctrines, the following historical sequence can be discerned.

Stage 1: the recognition of the full divinity of Jesus Christ.
Stage 2: the recognition of the full divinity of the Spirit.
Stage 3: the definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, embedding and clarifying these central insights, and determining their mutual relationship.

This sequential development is acknowledged by Gregory of Nazianzen, who pointed to a gradual progress in clarification and understanding of the

mystery of God's revelation in the course of time. It was, he argued, impossible to deal with the question of the divinity of the Spirit, until the issue of the divinity of Christ had been settled.

> The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly, while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before [the divinity of] the Son had been acknowledged . . . Instead, by gradual advances and . . . partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.

The Functions of the Spirit

What does the Holy Spirit do? The Christian tradition has generally understood the work of the Holy Spirit to focus on three broad areas: revelation, salvation, and the Christian life. In what follows we shall provide a brief indication of the richness of the Christian understanding of the role of the Spirit in each of these three areas.

1 *Revelation.* There has been a widespread recognition of the pivotal role of the Spirit in relation to the making of God known to humanity. Irenaeus wrote of the "Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied, and our forebears learned of God and the righteous were led in the paths of justice." Similarly, in his 1536 commentary on the gospels, Martin Bucer argues that revelation cannot occur without the assistance of God's Spirit:

> Before we believe in God and are inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are unspiritual and for that reason we are completely unable to apprehend anything relating to God. So all the wisdom and righteousness which we possess in the absence of the Holy Spirit are the darkness and shadow of death.

The task of the Holy Spirit is to lead us into God's truth; without that Spirit, truth remains elusive.

The role of the Spirit in relation to the most important theological source of the Christian tradition is of particular importance. The doctrine of the "inspiration of Scripture" affirms that the Bible has a God-given authority by virtue of its origins. This doctrine, in various forms, is the common tradition of Christianity, and has its origins in the Bible itself, most notably the affirmation that "every Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*)" (2 Timothy 3:16). In Protestant theology, however, the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture serves an additional purpose – that of insisting on the

primacy of Scripture over the church. Whereas more catholic writers point to the formation of the canon of Scripture as indicating the authority of the church over that of Scripture, Protestant writers argue that the church merely recognized an authority which was already present within Scripture itself.

Yet it is not simply God's revelation which is linked with the work of the Spirit; the Spirit is also widely regarded as being involved in the human response to that revelation. Most Christian theologians have regarded faith itself as the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. John Calvin is one writer who draws attention to the pivotal role of the Spirit in revealing God's truth and applying or "sealing" this truth to humanity.

> Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ, and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

2 *Salvation.* We have already noted how patristic writers justified the divinity of the Spirit with reference to the functions of the Spirit. Many of those functions relate directly to the doctrine of salvation – for example, the role of the Spirit in sanctification, making humanity like God, and divinization. This point is particularly important within the eastern Christian tradition, with its traditional emphasis on deification; western concepts of salvation, which tend to be relational rather than ontological, nevertheless find room for a role for the Spirit. Thus in Calvin's doctrine of the application of salvation, the Holy Spirit plays a major role in relation to the establishment of a living relationship between Christ and the believer.

3 *The Christian life.* For many writers, the Holy Spirit plays an especially important role in relation to the Christian life, both at the individual and corporate level. The fifth-century writer Cyril of Alexandria is one of many to stress the role of the Spirit in bringing unity within the church.

> All of us who have received the one and the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, are in a sense merged together with one another and with God . . . Just as the power of the holy flesh of Christ united those in whom it dwells into one body, I think that, in much the same way, the one and undivided Spirit of God, who dwells in us all, leads us all into spiritual unity.

A further development of this aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit is due to Augustine. Augustine regards the Spirit as the bond of unity between Father and Son on the one hand, and between God and believers on the other. The Spirit is a gift, given by God, which unites believers both to God and to other believers. The Holy Spirit forges bonds of unity between

believers, upon which the unity of the church ultimately depends. The church is the "temple of the Holy Spirit," within which the Holy Spirit dwells. The same Spirit which binds together the Father and Son in the unity of the godhead also binds together believers in the unity of the church.

However, any properly Christian understanding of the role of the Spirit will go far beyond this, and will include reference to at least two other areas. First, the "making real" of God in personal and corporate worship and devotion. The importance of the role of the Spirit in relation to Christian prayer, spirituality, and worship has been stressed by many writers, classic and modern. Second, the enabling of believers to lead a Christian life, particularly in relation to morality. In his 1536 gospels commentary, Martin Bucer draws attention to the necessity of the Spirit, if believers are to keep the law.

> So those who believe are not under the law, because they have the Spirit within them, teaching them everything more perfectly than the law ever could, and motivating them much more powerfully to obey it. In other words, the Holy Spirit moves the heart, so that believers wish to live by those things which the law commands, but which the law could not achieve by itself.

This aspect of the role of the Holy Spirit has become increasingly prominent in modern Christian discussions, on account of the rise of the charismatic movement, which places an emphasis on the energizing role of the Spirit within the Christian life.

The Church

The Greek word *ekklesia*, used in the New Testament to refer to the church, does not denote a building, but a group of people. It literally means "those who are called out." The church consists of those who have been called out of the world into a community of faith – those who God has "called out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Ecclesiology was not a major issue in the early church. The eastern church showed no awareness of the potential importance of the issue. Most Greek patristic writers of the first five centuries contented themselves with describing the church using recognizably scriptural images, without choosing to probe further. The following elements can be discerned as having achieved a wide consensus at the time:

1 The church is a spiritual society, which replaces Israel as the people of God in the world.