

## Chapter 1



# Introduction

GETTING STARTED  
IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

**W**estern textbooks of systematic theology usually begin with the question of authority. Is the Bible alone authoritative, or is the Bible's authority supplemented or even replaced by the authority of certain people? In evangelical Protestant circles, this question invariably leads theologians to ascribe unique authority—and sometimes even exclusive authority—to the Bible. The Scriptures are the preeminent and perhaps even the only source of Christian doctrine. But as important as the question of the Bible's authority is, the church fathers provide us almost no help in articulating a doctrine of Scripture. Instead, if we are to do theology with the help of the church fathers, a better place to start is the question of the unintended rift that sometimes opens up between doctrine and life. In this introductory chapter, I would like briefly to explain why the Fathers gave so little apparent attention to biblical authority and then to turn our attention to the rift between doctrine and life that the Fathers focused on much more intensely.

### **THE CHURCH FATHERS AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY**

For the church fathers, the question of the Bible's authority was almost a nonissue. Virtually every page of any patristic writing includes quota-

tion after quotation from the Bible, and there is never any hint of doubt about whether the Bible is true. The overriding concern of the Fathers is not whether to believe the Bible but how to interpret it, not whether the Scriptures are authoritative but what they mean. The Fathers assumed that the Bible is accurate and authoritative, and if one may judge by the frequency of their quotations and the reverence they ascribe to it, one may also conclude that they regarded it as uniquely authoritative.<sup>1</sup> In most cases, they felt no need to declare the truthfulness or authority of the Bible directly.

Of course, we now live in a different intellectual age than the Fathers did, an age in which skepticism rather than belief is the norm, and in our world questions about authority are central to any discussion of what we are to believe. But at the same time, we should recognize that there is something significant hiding beneath the Fathers' seemingly too-easy belief in the truthfulness of Scripture. Assuming the authority of Scripture is in many ways a greater act of submission to God than seeking to demonstrate the Bible's uniqueness and accuracy. To some degree, trying to convince others that the Bible is reliable represents an effort to get people to trust us, to believe that we have sufficient arguments in our arsenal to prove that they should take the Bible seriously. By contrast, using the Bible, with no prefatory remarks about whether it is worthy of such respect, is to assign it an even higher place. To state this point differently, much modern theology argues that we should trust the Bible because we can demonstrate that it is reliable. In contrast, the Fathers assumed that the Bible is trustworthy because it came from God, and they assumed this so implicitly and wholeheartedly that they rarely even mentioned the Bible's uniqueness directly. They simply acted on the uniqueness of Scripture by memorizing it, studying it, citing it, using it. Because of this the Fathers have relatively little to offer to our articulation of the doctrine of Scripture, but in their practice they have a great deal to tell us about what submission to the authority of Scripture looks like.

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Athanasius's exhaustive passage-by-passage refutation of Arius's biblical interpretation in *Against the Arians*. See also Augustine's clear statement of the unique authority of Scripture in *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, bk. 2, par. 4 (NPNF<sup>1</sup>, vol. 4, 427).

Following the church fathers, I would like in this book to assume that the Bible is the unique and final authority, the primary source of truth on all matters related to God, his actions in history and humanity's relationship to him. You as the reader might already share this assumption, but even if you do not, I ask you at least to grant that the Bible might be reliable and thus can be taken seriously. Instead of starting with the doctrine of Scripture, I would like to begin our discussion of Christian theology by examining a problem that contemporary Christianity often unintentionally creates for itself.

#### **AN UNINTENDED PROBLEM: DOCTRINE AND CHRISTIAN LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM**

One of the significant problems in contemporary Christianity is that people unwittingly drive a wedge between theology and the living of Christian life. Current evangelical theology is well articulated, carefully argued, logical and systematic, but the people in our churches (and indeed many of our church leaders) are not always able to grasp the relation between that theology and Christian life. Theology is what we believe, and Christian life is what we do, but the intimate connection between these is often not clearly stated and sometimes not even understood.

This is a bold claim, and you may or may not agree with it, but consider a couple of questions with me. First, what do we say is the centerpiece of the Christian faith? And second, what do we hear week after week in sermons, Sunday school classes and Bible studies? We often say that Jesus is the heart of our message, but if one were to chart the main point of every sermon from every Christian pulpit over the course of a year, one might be surprised to find out that certain other topics tend to get a lot more attention than Jesus does. Preachers, teachers and Bible study leaders tend to focus on what Christians are supposed to do, on how God helps us to do it, on the need for forgiveness, on the importance of the church and (in some churches) on what will happen at the end of the world. Now, all of these are important things, but I am convinced that they lie not at the center but somewhat out toward the edges of Christianity. What we say the Christian faith is all about and

what one hears week after week in church are not quite the same. So even if you have gone to church every Sunday of your life, you might not have heard clearly what lies at the very center of Christianity. You may know many Christian doctrines, many teachings derived from the Bible that explain what is true. And you may know a great deal about what Christian life is supposed to look like. But have you clearly heard how these fit together? Have you clearly heard what lies at the heart of the faith, what binds all the different aspects of belief and practice together? If you are like many contemporary evangelicals, perhaps you have not.

Why has this unintended split between doctrine and Christian life taken place? To grapple with that question, we need to return to two words I have used several times above: *doctrine* and *doctrines*. *Doctrine* comes from the Latin word for “teaching,” and thus Christian doctrine as a whole is the teaching of the Christian faith about topics that Christians believe to be significant. “Doctrines” are individual teachings on specific issues. Part of the reason there is a divorce between doctrine and Christian life is that contemporary evangelicals normally understand “doctrines” as concepts, teachings, true ideas (to which we often give the word *propositions*), and we unwittingly see these doctrines as the objects of our faith. So we ask questions such as, “Do you believe in the doctrine of justification by faith?” This question is perfectly well-intended, but it does not ask what it means to ask. When we ask this question, we intend the correct answer to be yes, but it is not. The correct answer to the question should be a qualified no, because Christians do not believe in the doctrine of justification by faith *per se*, but rather in the God who has justified us through our faith. He, and he alone, is properly the object of our faith, our trust, our submission. Doctrines are statements designed to point us to God; they are not meant as objects of faith themselves. To state this another way, we believe that the doctrine of justification by faith is true because we trust in the God who has justified us.

Now you may want to accuse me of needless hairsplitting here. But I am convinced that part of the reason we tend to regard theology, doctrine, as being somewhat irrelevant to Christian life is that our

theological discussions focus on the doctrines rather than on the God to whom those doctrines point. Theologians have unintentionally given the impression that the doctrines, the ideas about God, are the subject of our study. As a result, students and others unwittingly substitute truths about God for God. Then the most spiritually sensitive Christians, the ones who sense that there must be more to Christianity than knowing things about God, begin to look elsewhere besides doctrines for their understanding of Christian life.

I should hasten to add that this situation is not intentional. I am not by any means accusing Christian theologians and preachers of intentionally trying to hide anything from us or to drive a wedge between what we believe and what we should do. Instead, the problem is that at the heart of Christianity lies something that is deeply mysterious and perhaps hard to explain. And Christians tend to describe this mysterious center using certain words and phrases that have a lot of emotional resonance for us, even though (I am convinced) we cannot articulate what they mean. For example, how many times have you heard people talk about “a personal relationship with Christ”? Lots of times, right? But how often have you heard anyone really explain what that means? Maybe not so often. Maybe never. It is the same way with words like *grace* and *glory*. The more Christians use these words and phrases, the less obvious it becomes that we do not know what they mean. So we are able to give the impression that we know what we are talking about, without even realizing ourselves that maybe we do not.

Unlike some of us, however, the church fathers did know what they meant when they used the words and phrases we so often use. Indeed, they had to know what they meant, because when Christianity was very young, they were talking and writing to people who had never heard these ideas before, people who would not simply nod when they used the buzzwords, but who spoke up, asked questions and forced the church’s preachers and teachers to come up with good answers. As I studied the church fathers and compared them with what I knew of the Bible and of Christianity, I began more and more to realize that they were on to something that we have largely forgotten, that they were able to articulate the heart of the Christian message in a way that

we often cannot. To say it differently, they were able to articulate the connection between the doctrines of the faith and the Christian life in a clearer and more persuasive way than we are usually able to do. And because of this, they can help provide a solution to a problem that I believe faces contemporary evangelicalism: the unintended divorce between the way we talk about doctrine and the way we talk about the Christian life.

### **AN ANCIENT SOLUTION: *Theōsis* AS THE LINK BETWEEN DIVINE LIFE AND HUMAN LIFE**

In a nutshell, the way the early church avoided the problem of divorcing doctrine from Christian life was by understanding all of Christian life in direct connection to God's life. The fathers of the church did not first speak about God, then speak about salvation and then speak about

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*Athanasius on Humanity's Becoming Divine (ca. 315):*

If someone wishes to see God, who is invisible by nature and in no way visible, he understands and knows him from his works, so he who does not see Christ with his mind, let him learn of him from the works of his body. . . . Let him . . . wonder that through such simple means these divine things have been revealed to us, and that through death immortality has come to all, and through the incarnation of the Word the universal providence and its leader and creator the Word of God himself have been made known. For he became man that we might become divine; and he revealed himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured insults from men that we might inherit incorruption.

*On Incar.*, par. 54 (Thomson, 269)

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Christian life. Instead, the way they spoke about God constituted their discussion of salvation and Christian life. One could say that they did not have separate doctrines about God and about salvation but rather that their doctrine of God was their doctrine of salvation. In the sidebar

on the previous page, notice the direct connection the fourth-century Egyptian theologian Athanasius makes between the incarnation of the Son and our salvation. But saying that they had a single doctrine rather than separate doctrines is still not adequate, because their focus was not so much on the doctrine itself as it was on the God in whose life they shared. Doctrine, as they understood it, pointed beyond itself to God, in whose divine life human beings are called to share.

In order to speak of this sharing in divine life, the fathers of the church used a Greek word, *theōsis*, which is at once both important and easy to misunderstand. The word comes from the word *theos*, meaning “God,” and it refers to the process by which human beings are made, in some sense, divine. (Notice Athanasius’s use of the phrase “become divine” in the sidebar above.) Because of this, the word *theōsis* was rendered *deificatio* in Latin and is normally translated “deification” in English, but one should immediately recognize that the Fathers did not understand deification to mean that we become divine in the same way God is divine. Virtually all of them rigidly maintained the divide between God the creator and everything that he created (including human beings), and they insisted that no one could move from the human side to the divine side of that divide. No one who began to exist in time can become eternal in the sense of having existed before time. No one who is finite can become infinite. No one can become divine in the sense of becoming a fourth person of the Trinity. No one can become a child of God in the same way that Jesus is God’s Son. The church was adamant on all of these points. But if by *deification* the early church did not mean that we transcend the creator/creature distinction, what did it mean? And how can an idea labeled with such a suspicious word be of any possible use in helping contemporary evangelicals overcome our dichotomy between doctrine and Christian life?

Answering these questions requires us to dig a bit into the world of patristic thought, and such digging will help to explain why I believe that the relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity is the scarlet thread of the Christian faith. In the mind of the early church, there were many biblical passages that lent support to the idea

of *theōsis* as the link between God and humanity, but the two passages they mentioned most frequently in their writings were Psalm 82:6-7 and 2 Peter 1:3-4. The first of these passages reads, “I said, ‘You are “gods”’; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler.” Western interpreters typically take the phrases “gods” and “sons of the Most High” to be honorary titles given to kings and other rulers, not as literal or even quasi-literal statements about people who are somehow divine.<sup>2</sup> However, the early church was united in affirming that the phrases refer to people in general and that to be gods means to be sons of God.

The other passage, 2 Peter 1:3-4, reads, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” Here one should notice that participation in the divine nature is linked to overcoming corruption and death. Furthermore, Peter follows these words with a list of godly qualities that believers are to acquire and foster: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (2 Pet 1:5-7). On the basis of this passage, the early church affirmed that *theōsis*, or deification, involved overcoming our mortality and corruption by participating in God’s immortality and sharing more and more in the godly qualities Peter lists.

From these passages and others, the fathers of the church recognized that there were various aspects of *theōsis*, or deification. God grants us to share in his qualities (what Western theologians would later call “communicable attributes of God”), grants us to share in his immortal life (not in the sense that we gain the power to live forever on our own but in the sense that God, who alone is immortal by nature, grants us to live unendingly) and causes us to become sons and daughters of God. The last of these ideas can be subdivided further when one asks what it means to be a child of God. Sonship or adoption (obviously a major

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<sup>2</sup>Notice that the NIV places the word *gods* in quotation marks, indicating that the editors do not believe it is to be taken literally.

motif in the New Testament)<sup>3</sup> might imply simply that we gain the status of sons, or it could mean that we share somehow in the warmth of love that the Father and the Son have.

These different aspects of *theōsis* are by no means mutually exclusive, and many scholars of the early church argue that the Fathers' concept of deification embraced all of them, and others as well.<sup>4</sup> However, I suggest that in most cases, one or another aspect tended to predominate in the thought of a given church father. For some, especially in the Latin-speaking part of the Christian world, the idea of deification as our sharing in the status of divine children rose to the surface. These writers tended to focus on issues such as guilt and innocence and to see forgiveness of sins and a changed status before God as the primary aspects of salvation. This strand of thought eventually came to dominate in the Western church, which is part of why modern Protestantism has majored so strongly on justification as a right status before God. For others, especially in the Greek-speaking world, deification was primarily a matter of sharing in divine qualities, and occasionally this idea became so prominent that the writers in question ran the risk of blurring the line between God and human beings. For still others, including some in both Greek- and Latin-speaking regions, the concept of deification was primarily a way to focus on the relational aspects of sonship: Christ is the natural, only-begotten Son of God, and in a way that is both similar and different, Christians become adopted sons and daughters of God, thus sharing by grace in the fellowship the Son has with the Father by nature.

### DIVINE LIFE AS TRINITARIAN LIFE

As I have studied the way the Fathers wrote of Christian life, I have become increasingly convinced that the third of these strands represents the best and most biblical way of articulating the idea of *theōsis*. It is of course true to speak of salvation as a change of status and to express

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Rom 8:14–23; 9:4, 26–27; 2 Cor 6:18; Gal 3:26–4:7; Eph 1:5; Heb 12:5–8.

<sup>4</sup>The most comprehensive recent treatment of the subject is found in Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Russell addresses a variety of facets of *theōsis*, but he does not seek to argue (as I do) that the Fathers should be grouped according to which aspect of *theōsis* is their primary emphasis.

salvation in the categories of guilt, forgiveness and justification. It is also true to speak of salvation (especially what Protestants call the process of sanctification) in terms of acquiring and developing the qualities of God, although most evangelicals would prefer to describe this process using the more directly biblical phrase “being conformed to the image of Christ” (see Rom 8:29). But I suggest that neither of these is the central aspect of Christian life. Instead, both forgiveness and becoming Christlike flow from our participation in a relationship, from our becoming sons and daughters by adoption so as to share in the communion that the natural Son has with God the Father. Furthermore, I believe that this way of understanding salvation and Christian life was widely represented in, and perhaps even the consensus of, the early church.<sup>5</sup> This is the strand of patristic thought that I believe has the most to teach contemporary evangelicalism and that can help to end the unintentional divorce between theology and Christian life that often plagues our churches, colleges and seminaries. This is the strand of thought to which I would like to direct our attention in the course of this book.

### **LIFE IN THE TRINITY: THE FORGOTTEN HEART OF CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Accordingly, the scarlet thread around which this book seeks to organize the various truths of Christianity is the life of the Trinity, the relationship that the trinitarian persons share with one another. This book grows out of my conviction (forged as I have learned to read the Bible the way a certain strand of thought in the early church interpreted it) that all of Christian life, and indeed all of human life, is directly related to the central relationship that exists. This is a relationship that is shared among Father, Son and Spirit, but in Scripture it is particularly expressed in terms of the Father’s relationship to his beloved Son. What many (perhaps most) within the early church meant by the disconcerting word *theōsis*, or deification, was believers’ sharing

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<sup>5</sup>For a fuller discussion of these three strands in the early church, see Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (2007): 289–310.

in the warm fellowship that has existed from all eternity between the persons of the Trinity, a fellowship that Scripture announces to us when it speaks of the Father's love for his Son. Because this concept is so central and so crucial, and yet the word used to describe it is so easy for contemporary Christians to misinterpret, I will normally not use the word *theōsis* or *deification* in this book. Instead, I will use phrases such as "participation in the Father-Son relationship," "sharing the love between the persons of the Trinity" and the like.

If I am right that this personal fellowship between the persons of the Trinity is the scarlet thread of Christianity, then why did the Protestant Reformers not emphasize it? Well, some of them did, and others of them assumed it without stating it so insistently. After all, they had to spend most of their energy writing about the issues on which they disagreed with Roman Catholicism, not the issues on which they agreed. But the longer we assume something without explicitly stating it, the more likely we are to forget it. And this, I fear, is what has happened in evangelicalism more recently. We have faithfully majored on the truths the Reformers stressed, but we have underemphasized the context in which they spoke those truths, to the point that we have forgotten what they knew and assumed. If we are to recover what the Reformers assumed, and thus to understand our own emphases (like justification by faith) in the context of the life of the Trinity in which those emphases make sense, we have to go back farther than the Reformation. We have to go back to the period of the church fathers, to remember their articulation of the heart of Christian faith as the Reformers themselves remembered it and made it the starting point for their own theology.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have suggested that the early church succeeded better than we usually do at uniting doctrines and doctrine, theology and life, precisely because their integrating theological theme was one that spanned the gulf between the God on whom doctrine focuses and the believers who live out the Christian life. The concept of *theōsis*, understood correctly, provides a way of linking God's life to human life, and specifically to Christian life. We Christians are meant to live in a way

that somehow participates in God's own life, so anything that we may say about God has direct applicability to the outworking of Christian life. Furthermore, I have argued that one common understanding of *theōsis* in the early church saw our participation in divine life primarily in terms of our sharing in the relationship between the Father and the Son. This strand was not the only one, and I do not intend to give the impression that the Fathers were completely monolithic in their understanding of Christianity. But it was a common strand, and even if I am not correct that it was the consensus, it was still a well-enough represented strand of thought that it deserves our attention today.

In this strand of thought, participation in divine life means primarily sharing in the life of the Trinity, sharing in the relationship that has characterized the Father, Son and Spirit from all eternity past. This understanding provides another appropriate place to begin the study of Christian theology besides the issue of authority, and I now turn to this understanding as I seek to probe the heart of the Christian faith with the help of the church fathers.

## Chapter 2



# The Heart of Christianity

THE SON'S RELATIONSHIP  
TO THE FATHER

One could argue that the best way to start looking for the heart of Christian faith would be to ask what God has made us for, what his purpose in creating us was. That would then mean that we need to start with the book of Genesis and the account of God's creating human beings. Genesis would certainly be a good place to begin, but I believe that another appropriate place to start would be in the middle of history, indeed with an event close to the central point of human history, the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **A WINDOW INTO THE HEART OF THE FAITH: JESUS' WORDS IN JOHN 13–17**

Jesus was crucified on a Friday in early April of the year 30 or 33, and the evening before he was crucified was one of the most emotionally charged, poignant evenings that anyone could possibly have lived through. He knew what was coming—his betrayal, arrest, trial and death by crucifixion—but his disciples did not. With those impending events in mind, he gathered his twelve disciples together for what they thought was simply a celebration of the Jewish Passover. Jesus' disciples did not know that when they came together, Jesus would do more than

celebrate with them a past deliverance; he would also institute before them the representation of a future deliverance, a deliverance that he would bring about through his death and resurrection. The ceremony that Jesus instituted that evening is variously called the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Table, the Eucharist (which means "thanksgiving" in Greek) or simply Communion. But at the time, the disciples did not know that this would be the last meal they would share with Jesus before his death. They did not know that he was soon to die, although if they had been paying close enough attention to what he had said recently, they probably could have and should have known.<sup>1</sup>

Because of Jesus' knowledge of what would happen next and his disciples' ignorance of what was coming, the dynamic between them that evening was almost eerie. Every word he said, every action he performed, was pregnant with significance, but by and large, the disciples did not get it. Only looking back on that evening later did they recognize the full significance of what Jesus had said and done. We find the events of that evening described in several places in the New Testament. Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22 all give us the basic sequence of events—Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the upper room, left his disciples for a time while he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, was arrested there and taken back into the city to be tried. Unlike the other three Gospels, John's Gospel gives us fewer of the things Jesus did (for example, John does not mention the prayer in the garden or even the institution of the Lord's Supper) but gives us much more detail about what Jesus said that evening. And these words of Jesus—words full of meaning as they came from one who knew he was about to die a premature death—give us a window into the heart and soul of the Christian faith. These words, recorded in John 13–17, were one of the key focal points of the early church's study and its articulation of the Christian message. These are the words I would like us to look at together in this chapter.

Keep in mind that the disciples were expecting Jesus' words to look backward, back to the Passover and the exodus, the great deliverance of God's people that had taken place so long before. To their surprise, Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>See Mt 16:21–28 (and parallels Mk 8:31 and Lk 9:22–27); Mt 20:17–19 (and parallels Mk 10:32–34 and Lk 18:31–33).

spends a great deal of time looking forward, speaking of the future—the way the disciples will love and serve one another. And when he does look backward, he goes back not just to the Passover but all the way back to the “time” (one can hardly even use that word) before the world existed. They are expecting a look at what to them seems like the distant past, but Jesus gives them a look at the past before the past, before there was even a universe. And then from the past he takes them to the future, a future that he sees clearly but they, of course, do not. Jesus’ words here are called the upper room discourse (Jn 13–16) and the high-priestly prayer (Jn 17). It should have been thrilling to listen to Jesus speak if the disciples had grasped what he was talking about. It must have been thrilling for them later to remember what he had said and recognize what he had meant. And it was thrilling for the church fathers to reflect on those words in the centuries that followed.

In this chapter I do not intend to go sentence by sentence through what Jesus says here. Instead, I would like to concentrate on a few key passages from John 13, 14, 15 and 17, and through these passages I would like to call your attention to the relation between God’s love and the love believers are to have for one another.

### **CHRISTIAN LOVE: THE REFLECTION OF CHRIST’S LOVE**

Israel in ancient times was a really dusty place. The scarcity of vegetation and the arid climate meant that for most of the year (except for the two rainy periods in October/November and March/April) the land was virtually a dust bowl, and the dust got onto everything that was outdoors. In addition, there was nothing like modern garbage collection or sewer systems; waste of all kinds was thrown out into the streets. And to top it all off, people generally wore open sandals when they were outside. So one of the urgent tasks was to keep all of that dust outside, rather than tracking it into the house. Since everyone’s feet were dusty, the first order of business whenever one entered a house was to wash one’s feet, and no one would ever want to do this for someone else, although sometimes a servant was forced to. One generally had to do it oneself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ancient Near Eastern social etiquette required the host to provide water for his guests to wash their feet, as mentioned in Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; Judg 19:21. John the Baptist’s statement that

In light of this background, the way Jesus begins this Passover celebration in John 13 is eye-popping to his disciples. He washes their feet. John tells us that this happened while the meal was being served (Jn 13:2-5), so at this point everyone's feet would already have been washed as they entered the upper room. But even if their feet are not dusty anymore, the mental associations raised in anyone's mind by foot washing are stunning. It is unthinkable to the disciples that anyone would voluntarily wash someone else's feet, and it is beyond unthinkable that Jesus, their master and teacher, would wash his disciples' feet. It would have been an act of breathtaking devotion for a student to wash his teacher's feet, but here is the teacher washing the students' feet! Jesus goes on to say that he has given them an example, that they are to serve each other with the same kind of humility he has shown his disciples through this unforgettable action. You can bet that this makes quite an impression on the twelve men gathered with him.

Then, not long after this, Jesus speaks the words that I would like to concentrate on. He says to the disciples:

Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (Jn 13:31-35)

At first glance, this passage seems to be utterly preposterous. Jesus is about to die. Why would he speak of this moment as the moment when God is going to glorify him? How can Jesus say that God will be glorified in the Son, who is about to undergo the most humiliating, inglorious kind of death one can imagine? We might think that Jesus should complain that God is going to abandon him or that God should com-

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he is not worthy even to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals (Mk 1:7) is probably a reference to the task of removing a person's sandals before washing his feet as he comes into a house.

plain that he is going to be embarrassed in the Son. But instead Jesus speaks of glory. How can he say this? To understand this, we need to look fairly carefully at what “glory” means in the Bible.

Literally, the Hebrew word translated “glory” means “weight,” and the Greek word means “praise.” These words are starting from different ends of an idea, but the concept that both are heading toward is that God is the one who is massive, great, ponderous, magnificent and thus worthy to be praised. So when we “glorify God” or “give God glory,” we are praising him because he is great and magnificent. This does not mean that we are giving him anything he does not already possess. He is majestic and spectacular whether anyone acknowledges this or not. Rather, for us to give God glory is to acknowledge that he is glorious, to state publicly that he is vastly greater than we are. This is why the Bible sometimes uses the phrase “ascribe to God the glory due his name” (see Ps 29:1-2) as a more precise version of the shorter phrase “glorify God.”

However, one should recognize that majesty or greatness is not all that is conveyed by the word “glory.” In addition, throughout the Old and New Testaments the glory of God is connected to his presence with his people. A brief look back through Israel’s history will make this clear. Just after the exodus, as the people of Israel prepare to cross the Red Sea, God gives them a visible symbol of his presence with them—a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night (Ex 13:20-22). This pillar guides them during the upcoming forty years of wandering in the wilderness before they enter the land of Israel promised to them. Shortly after this, as the people are camped in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, they begin to grumble against Moses and Aaron because they have no food. Moses and Aaron say to the people, “In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him” (Ex 16:6-7). As promised, the next day, as Aaron is talking to the people, “they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud” (Ex 16:10). Here the cloud that has previously signified God’s presence is specifically called “the glory of the LORD,” and further-

more, this event coincides with God's beginning to give the people manna to eat, another visible sign of his presence with them and provision for them (see all of Ex 16). Later, as the people camp at the foot of Mount Sinai and God begins to give them the Law, starting with the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), he calls Moses up to the top of the mountain. The text reads: "When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain" (Ex 24:15-17). Here, just after the breathtaking deliverance from Egypt that constituted Israel as a nation set apart for God, the Lord gives the people this constant reminder of his presence with them, his unique relationship to them. And the phrase Scripture uses for this presence is "the glory of the LORD."

For the rest of Israel's history, God's majestic greatness is linked to his unique presence with his own people through this cloud of "the glory of the LORD." After the tabernacle—the movable place of worship representing God's presence with his people—is completed, we read: "Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. . . . So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels" (Ex 40:34, 38). Similarly, once the temple—the stationary place of worship representing God's presence—is completed and the ark of the covenant is brought into its innermost room (the holy of holies), the text declares: "The cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple" (1 Kings 8:10-11). As he watches this event, King Solomon says, "The LORD has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever" (1 Kings 8:12-13).

Of course the temple was not the final sign of God's presence with his people, nor was this earthly temple permanent. Instead the New Testament ties God's majestic presence with his people to the incarnation and life of Christ. As the angels appear to announce Jesus' birth to

the shepherds, Luke writes, “The glory of the Lord shone around them” (Lk 2:9). When John describes the incarnation with the famous words, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” he explains by writing, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). We shall look in detail at this passage later, but for now, the point is simply that the glory of God is connected to the presence of God with his people, and this presence is uniquely shown in the entrance of his one and only Son into the world. Finally, in the chapter just before the upper room discourse begins, Jesus speaks of his impending death by saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn 12:23). This brings us up to where we are now, in the upper room, puzzling over Jesus’ strange association of “death” with “glory.” But now we can recognize that the idea of glory is not just that God is majestic and great. It is that this God, the only God, the God who is majestic, is with us and acting for us.<sup>3</sup>

With all this in mind, look at the first part of John 13:31–32 again: “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.” If God’s glory is not just his greatness but his presence with us, then this passage must mean that the impending death of Jesus is the supreme way in which God is present with us. The God so vast that endless galaxies cannot contain him, so great that he could simply speak and cause the universe to burst into existence, so mighty that he could produce or circumvent the normal course of nature as he wished, is now about to show his glorious presence in the most unlikely way. If the teacher washing the disciples’ feet was not unlikely enough, the Lord of the universe dying on the cross is surely the most unexpected demonstration of greatness. But this is what God is going to do. This is the very definition of what it means for God to be present with us. This is somehow going to be the most glorious moment in history. How that can be possible is something to which I will return later in this book, but for now we need to recognize that the Father is getting ready to

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<sup>3</sup>For other uses of the word “glory” in connection with God’s presence, see Ex 33:12–22; Lev 9:23–24; Deut 5:24; 1 Sam 4:21–22.

glorify both the Son and himself—by allowing the Son to die for us.

With this most improbable description of glory in place, Jesus then tells the disciples what he wants them—and all of us who follow Jesus today—to do. In the latter part of the passage we are considering, he says: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). It is hardly a surprise that Jesus wants Christians to love one another, and in fact the first sentence of this quotation is one of the most well-known sentences in the Bible. But notice two things about this passage. First, Jesus says that our love for one another is intimately connected to his love for us. As he has loved us, so we are to love one another. What is the nature of this connection? Does he mean because he has loved us, we should love one another? Surely he means at least this much. Does he mean we should love one another in the same way that he has loved us? Probably so, especially in light of the stunning demonstration of servant love he has given through washing the disciples’ feet. I suggest that what Jesus means here includes both of those ideas but goes even further. He means we should love one another with the very same love with which he has loved us.

What Jesus means here becomes clearer later in the upper room discourse, but for now, we need to recognize that our love for one another is meant to be a mirror of the love Christ has shown us. And that leads directly to the second thing we should notice about the passage: that the way the world (that is, the broader society of people who do not yet follow Christ) will know we are Christ’s disciples is by the way we love one another. Our love somehow grows out of Christ’s love for us, and our love for one another reflects Christ’s love for us. It is so much like his love that when people see us, they are reminded of the way Christ acted when he was on earth. If one asks what the heart of the Christian faith is, part of the answer is that a life reflecting the love Jesus has shown for us lies close to that heart. Notice that this is not the same as saying simply that we should love one another, that we are looking for some kind of community life in which people get along and are nice to each other. This is more than that, and a different kind of love than

that. This is a love that is specifically connected to the life of one person who lived two thousand years ago, a person who is the Son of God. Near the heart of our faith, and thus near the heart of our theology, lies a love that reflects that love.

At this point, this is all pretty general, and (one might say) not particularly clear. We need to keep going, because as the upper room discourse progresses, Jesus gets increasingly specific about the kind of love he is talking about here.

### **OBEDIENCE: A MEANS OF LOVING**

In the previous section of this chapter, you may have bristled at the fact that Jesus uses the word “command.” You may not like the idea that religion (or life, for that matter) might involve commands. If so, then the title of this section may have really annoyed you. In fact, you may think that if one is focusing on obedience to commands, one cannot possibly have love as the underlying motivation. You may be thinking that “obedience” and “commands” belong in the sphere of duty, not in the sphere of love. If this is what you are thinking, then I ask you to set aside your annoyance temporarily, just long enough to listen to what Jesus tells his disciples a bit later in the upper room discourse. He says:

If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (Jn 14:15-21)

Notice that at both the beginning and the end of this passage, Jesus connects love to obedience. If we love him, we will do what he commands. There are two things that we need to recognize about these statements.

First, Jesus directly contradicts the notion that love and obedience belong in different spheres, a notion that many people in contemporary society hold (whether consciously or subconsciously). We tend to think that something can be love only if it is between equals, and when we are talking about equals, obedience is out of place. We think that between equals, there is neither command nor obedience but that everything is worked out by consensus. Jesus' words here remind us that our relationship with him is not one of equals. Christianity affirms that Jesus is God, and an unbiased reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus understands himself that way. Yes, he is fully human too, just as we are. But first and foremost, he is God. At the time he says these words, he has been human for a bit more than thirty years, but he has been God from all eternity. We should not, cannot and do not relate to Jesus as equals. He is our God, our master, and we are his servants. (We will see shortly that we are more than merely his servants, but still, we are his servants.) Part of the reason we get annoyed whenever anyone speaks of obedience is that we do not like to admit that we are unequal to someone else. But when we are talking about Jesus, then the first thing we need to do in order to follow him is admit that we are not his equals. And since he is our master, he has every right to command us to do certain things and to expect our obedience. If that fact disturbs us emotionally, then perhaps the reason is that we are too proud to admit that we are not the highest beings in the universe. Once we clear our emotional baggage out of the way and recognize that Jesus does have the right to command us, we can see what he is saying here in a new light. By connecting love and obedience, Jesus is saying that for Christians, obedience is not a matter of mere duty. We, the servants, are called to obey our master, Jesus, out of love, not just out of duty. When Jesus commands us to do certain things, he is giving us the opportunity to love him by willingly keeping those commands rather than flatly disobeying them or keeping them merely grudgingly, merely out of a sense of duty. We can love him by obeying him joyfully and willingly.

The second thing we need to recognize about the link between love and obedience is that in the passage we looked at earlier, Jesus has also connected the two, but in a different way. There, the command was

that we love one another. Here keeping the commands is part of the way we show that we love Jesus. Whether a person really loves Jesus will be evident from whether that person loves other people. In fact, our love for others is so reflective of our love for Jesus that John will later write in one of his own letters, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 Jn 4:20). And we need to remember that our love for others reflects not only our love for Christ but also Christ’s love for us. There is—or at least there should be—an intricate web of loving relationships that reflect each other; and willing, loving obedience plays a big part in these relationships.

It should already be clear that the picture of love and obedience that Jesus is instilling into his disciples here is very different from what we think of when we hear the word *love*. We probably think of love as an isolated, exclusive relationship between two people. We likely imagine it as a relationship that separates them from everyone else rather than bringing them closer to everyone else. We probably see it as a relationship on its own terms rather than a relationship that is meant to mirror something else. And of course, the concept of obedience is unlikely to enter into our picture of love. In contrast to all that, Jesus here calls us to obey as a reflection of our love for him, to love as an act of willing obedience, to love others because we love him, to love him as he has loved us. What Jesus calls us to is a very different kind of love from what we are familiar with.

If you look again at the passage we are considering (Jn 14:15–21), you see that so far I have discussed only the beginning and the end, the brackets if you will. What about the bracketed part, the middle of the paragraph? In between his opening and closing statements on obedience, Jesus speaks of “another Counselor” whom he calls the “Spirit of truth,” and whom we normally call the Holy Spirit. Jesus says of the Spirit: “The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (Jn 14:17–20). Notice here that

Jesus makes some startling claims about the relationship between Christians and the Holy Spirit. The world (those who do not follow Christ) does not know this Spirit, but the disciples do. Furthermore, there will come a time when the Holy Spirit will not merely be with the disciples but will live in the disciples. We know that that time came not long after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and the day when the Holy Spirit began to live in Christians is described in Acts 2. From that time on, we who follow Christ have the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

Here we should also notice that Jesus links the Holy Spirit's dwelling within Christians to the fact that the Father and the Son are in each other. Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we will recognize that the Son is in the Father and the Son is in us. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the link between the Son's relationship to the Father and the Christian's relationship to the Son. As Jesus continues speaking, he will make this link much clearer. In the meantime, we notice again how interconnected the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Christians, love and obedience are. The very fabric of who we are is an intricate tapestry of relationships and actions. As we try to understand that tapestry more fully, let us look at what Jesus says later in the discourse.

#### **CHRISTIAN LOVE: THE SAME AS THE LOVE BETWEEN THE FATHER AND THE SON**

One of Jesus' best-known speeches is his vine-and-branches talk in John 15, which is the middle section of the upper room discourse. As beloved as this talk may be, it probably does not have nearly the impact with us that it did with its original audience, since not many of us live in agrarian societies. But for a group of Jews living in ancient Israel, nothing could have been a more appropriate image of the relationship between God, Jesus and Christians than a grape vine. Grapes were one of the primary crops of Israel, since they grew well in the arid climate, especially in the hill country where the contours of the land created natural terraces. They were essential to the lifestyle of the people, since wine was generally safer to drink than the available water was. Grapes were thus closely connected to life, to survival itself, and growing them

provided the livelihood for a significant segment of the population.

Let us take a look at part of what Jesus says in this famous speech:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. . . . No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (Jn 15:1, 4-5, 8)

From these words it becomes clear why Jesus chose this image. Christians are the branches, the ones who bear the grapes and thus the most visible producers in the grape-growing operation. But the branches cannot produce grapes on their own. If they are cut off from the vine, they become useless. And they must be pruned every spring and protected from predators. The connection between the branch, the vine/root and the gardener who tends the vine would have been clear to the disciples.

Notice also that in this paragraph the fruitfulness of Christians is to the Father's glory. Remembering that glory is connected to God's presence, we see that one of the ways God shows his presence on earth is through the actions of Christians, through the love we show for one another, through the fruit we bear. On our own, we can accomplish nothing. If we remain (or abide) in Christ, then we can keep God's commands and bear the sort of fruit that God intends us to. First and foremost, then, Christian life is a process of abiding in Christ, of relying on him, of recognizing and maintaining one's connection to him in all aspects of life. This image helps to explain what Jesus has said earlier in the discourse. Remember that when he said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" in John 13, I mentioned that there were various possibilities about how one might understand the connection between Jesus' love and ours. One possibility was that he meant we should love others because he has loved us. But by this point, it is clear that this cannot be all Jesus meant there. If we were simply to love because he loved us, then that would mean that we love on our own,

merely by imitating Christ. But we now know that the Holy Spirit lives within us—helping us, enabling us, leading us to love others. And now the image of the vine and the branches removes any possibility that we could or should imitate Christ’s love on our own. The connection between his love and ours is closer than this: as we remain in his love, Jesus works through us to make us fruitful, so that the Father’s glorious presence may be known.

This brings us to the next part of Jesus’ speech, in which he pulls together the various threads of the tapestry he has been weaving so far and articulates most clearly the relation between Christians, himself and God his Father. Jesus says:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (Jn 15:9-15)

Previously Jesus has forged a link between his love for us and our love for one another. Here he extends that link. His love for us is connected to the Father’s love for him. Furthermore, he does not say merely that we are to love each other because the Father loved him and he loved us, or even that we are to love each other in the same way as the Father loved him and he loved us. Instead, he says, “Now remain in my love.” We are to remain in the very same love with which Christ has loved us, which is in fact the very same love with which the Father has loved Christ. Somehow we are called to do more than simply imitate God’s love. We are called to remain in and to carry forward to the world the very love with which the Father has loved his Son from all eternity. The loving relationship between Father and Son, the glorious presence of the Father with the Son, is not simply a model that we are to follow. That relationship is the sub-

stance of what Jesus says Christians are to possess. Christ is not simply giving us an example; he is offering himself to us as a person, that we might share in his most deeply personal relationship, the relationship he has with God the Father.

Notice that just as in John 14, so also here, Jesus mentions obedience in connection with love. But here he goes beyond what he has said previously: he links our obeying his commands to his having obeyed the Father's commands. At this point, you may really object to the idea of obedience. Even if you (perhaps grudgingly) accepted what I wrote above—that we are not God's equals and thus that obedience is part of the way we love him—you may balk at what Jesus says here. He is God's equal. He is somehow the same God as the Father. So even if it is appropriate to speak of people's obedience to Christ, how can it be appropriate to speak of God the Son's obedience to God the Father? The answer implied in what Jesus says here is that even among equals, there are relationships which should be characterized as leader-follower or initiator-receptor or even lover-beloved, relationships in which obedience plays a part. God the Son is just as fully God as the Father; he is in every way equal to the Father. But he still obeys the Father and carries out his Father's will on earth. If he is willing to love his Father in this way, then we, who are not God's equals in any way whatsoever, should also be willing to love God and love Christ by obeying.

I will return to this idea in chapter four, but for now we need to recognize again how radically different this is from what we normally think of when we envision human relationships. Jesus is tying our human relationships to his relationship with the Father. God loves him; he loves his Father and obeys him. In obedience to the Father, he comes into the world to love us with the very same love with which he and the Father have loved each other. He calls us to love each other with that very same love, and as we will see later, this will involve a willingness to be both leaders and followers, initiators and receptors of love. But another thing that we need to notice in this passage is that Jesus insists his disciples are not just servants, even though they are to obey him. In fact, "servants" is not his preferred word for describing them, even though many followers of Christ will later use that word to de-

scribe themselves. (See Rom 1:1 and Jas 1:1 for examples of this.) Instead Christ calls the disciples “friends.” Why? Because someone who is merely a servant is not privy to his master’s reasons for doing something; he is simply told what he should do. A servant who is also a friend shares in his master’s purposes in a much greater way. He knows the big picture of who his master is and what his master is doing, and thus he sees clearly why he is being called to do his part of the task. God the Father called on his Son to obey, but at the same time, the Son shared fully in both the Father’s personal presence with him and in the big picture of the Father’s purposes. He knew the Father’s love toward him and thus the loving nature of the Father’s purposes toward humanity. In a similar way, the Son now calls us to obey, but he also shows us who he is and what he is doing. He gives us a glimpse of the love that lies behind his purposes, and so he calls us his friends rather than just his servants.

This is why typical Christian teaching can be so frustrating if it merely tells us what we are to do without granting us any insight into why the commands are important or how they fit with what God is doing. In the upper room discourse, Jesus shows us that the key to Christianity as it is meant to be is linking our lives to him, and indeed linking our lives directly to his own relationship with God the Father.

### **CHRISTIAN LOVE AND THE ETERNAL LOVE BETWEEN FATHER AND SON**

At some point after Jesus and the disciples leave the upper room, but before Jesus is arrested, he prays a prayer recorded in John 17. In many ways, this high-priestly prayer is an exact complement to the upper room discourse. In the discourse, Jesus has laid out a picture of life as God intends it, and in the prayer, he asks his Father to bring about the kind of life he has just described to the disciples. In this prayer, Jesus prays first for himself (Jn 17:1-5), then for the twelve disciples (Jn 17:6-19) and then for all those who will later become his followers (Jn 17:20-26). Let us look at what Jesus prays for himself:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that

they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (Jn 17:1-5)

In this passage, the phrase that may jump out at you first is “eternal life.” We all know that Jesus gives eternal life to those who believe in him. But what is eternal life? Most of us think of it either as a synonym for “heaven” or as meaning “living forever.” But neither of these gets to the heart of what eternal life, in the biblical sense, means. “Heaven,” the way many people use the word, means little more than the actualization of whatever a particular person happens to like. Heaven is the place where you never have to work or where you can play baseball all day long or where you can eat whatever you want and not have to worry about your cholesterol level. The word *heaven* has been trivialized so much that it is almost meaningless today. And “living forever” can be misleading as well. According to Scripture, all people are going to live forever, in one way or another. One of the marks of the significance God has given to every human being is that all will live forever, either with God or apart from God.<sup>4</sup> But that is not what Jesus means by “eternal life” here. Rather, the phrase translated “eternal life” means “life of the age.” It is referring to a future age, to the new kind of life that God will establish at the end of history, a life that will be shared by all those who believe in Christ and follow him. Eternal life is not just living forever; it is living in a certain way, having a certain quality of life that is available only to those who have faith in Christ.

So what is this kind of life like? Jesus says here that eternal life consists of knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ, whom God has sent. Notice right away how personal this description is. Jesus is not just saying eternal life is something that he will give us. He is not saying that because of what he has done, or what he will do or what we do, then we will get  $x$ ,  $y$  or  $z$  while living forever in heaven. Eternal life is knowing Christ and his Father, God. At the heart of the central idea of Christianity lies the reality that Christians will know the Father and the Son. This concurs

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<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Dan 12:1-3; Mt 13:36-43, 47-50; 2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 20:11-15; 21:1-8.

very closely with what he has said in the upper room discourse about our sharing in the love between the Father and the Son.

What makes this description of eternal life even more striking is that it comes not as Jesus is praying for us but as he is praying for himself. His giving us eternal life is intimately connected to God's glory, so much so that Jesus speaks of our eternal life in the same breath as he speaks about his glorifying the Father and the Father's glorifying him. God does not just bask in his own greatness and magnificence, he shares it. He shares that greatness within himself among the persons of the Trinity, and he shares that glorious presence with his people as well. So part of the way God shows forth his magnificence is by leading human beings to know him. And knowing him implies knowing both the Father and the Son whom the Father has sent.

In light of this idea, let us look at several other aspects of this passage from Jesus' prayer. We see that the Son's completion of the work God has given him to do (living and dying for our salvation—a work that Jesus has almost finished as he speaks these words) ascribes glory to the Father. That work shows the world just how magnificent God is. But notice verses 1 and 5. Jesus is praying that the Father may now glorify him, just as he has glorified the Father. And he describes that glory with the word "presence" and as something that he has had with the Father before the world began. The glory of God is the majestic presence of God. From all eternity, from before the moment he created the world, God has shared his magnificent presence. How? By sharing that presence between the Father and the Son. Christianity is unique among world religions in claiming both that there is only one God and that this one God exists as three persons, as the Trinity. Here Jesus indicates that the majesty of God shines forth as he shares his presence. Before there was a world or any people to sense that presence, God's glory shone forth in the relationship between the Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit as well, although Jesus does not mention him here). As we come to know the Son, we too see God's glorious presence, and this is eternal life. The presence that God has shared within himself, between the Father, Son and Spirit, is the heart of that knowledge of God which he gives to us and which constitutes eternal life. Through this part of the prayer, we see that eternal life

is much more than just something Christians get because of what Christ has done. Eternal life is a deeply personal knowledge of the one who has shared from all eternity in the glory of the Father. Somehow, the eternally glorious relationship between the Father and Son is shared with us as we follow Christ. The end, the future that awaits Christians, involves sharing in the relationship that has characterized God from the beginning, indeed from before the beginning, before there was human history or even earthly history. And again, this is similar to what we have seen in the upper room discourse.

Even more striking than what Jesus prays at the beginning of this prayer is what he says at the end, as he prays for all who will follow him. He continues to speak of glory and of the “time” before the creation of the world, but now he introduces another key idea, that of oneness or unity. Jesus prays that all believers may be “one” (Jn 17:21). Before I even quote the passage, we need to recognize that *one* is a pretty vague word; there are many different kinds of unity that could lead us to speak of people as “one.” People who have a common purpose or who come together to do a common task can speak of themselves as “one.” Americans used to pride themselves on being one people, with a common identity and culture, derived from many different ethnic groups. This is what our national motto, *e pluribus unum* (“from many, one”) implies. People who consider themselves to be soul mates or kindred spirits or even lovers often speak of themselves as “one.” This is what the lighting of the unity candle at many wedding ceremonies is designed to signify. In Eastern religions and philosophies, perhaps the central idea is that a person’s soul can become “one” with the universe. In fact, this Eastern idea is increasingly common in the West today, as people speak of realizing their oneness with the universe or actualizing the divinity within themselves. There are many kinds of oneness, and if this passage is really as central to the Christian message as I claim it is, then we need to grasp what kind of unity Jesus is praying for here.

Let us look carefully at the passage itself. Jesus says:

My prayer is not for them [the twelve disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they

also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (Jn 17:20-24)

There are a number of things in this passage that we need to consider. First, notice that when Jesus prays that Christians may be “one,” he explains this idea by saying that he is in the Father, the Father is in him, and Christians are to be in the Father and the Son. For followers of Jesus to be one with each other is somehow tied to the relationship between the Father and the Son, and Jesus uses the word *in* to describe that relationship. Second, notice that the unity between Christians is to be a major sign to the non-Christian world that God has sent Jesus. In other words, part of the way the world is to believe that Jesus is really God’s Son is because of the unity or oneness between Christians. Third, and perhaps most important, notice that Jesus ties oneness to love. In fact, he has talked a great deal about love in the upper room discourse, and now as he prays for Christians, he speaks not only of love but also of oneness. Saying that Christians should be one in the same way the Father and Son are one means the same thing as saying that Christians should love one another with the same love the Father has shown the Son. Fourth, notice that Jesus again speaks of eternal glory—of the presence of the Father with him before the world was created—and this time he ties that presence to the Father’s love for him.

So what kind of unity is Jesus talking about? He clearly has in mind something much greater than just a unity of purpose, like that which binds people together when they have a common task. He is not talking about a physical or emotional unity, like what binds wife and husband together. And he is not talking about a unity of substance, in which the distinction between God and people is lost, as is often the case in Eastern philosophical concepts of unity. In contrast to all of these, he is talking about a unity of love, and “unity” in this prayer is a

synonym for “love” as Jesus has used that word throughout the upper room discourse. To say that the Father and Son are “one” and are “in” each other is to speak of the love they have for each other, and Jesus says they have shared this love from all eternity, from before the time when they made the world. The glory of God has shone forth from all eter-

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*Irenaeus of Lyons on Christians’ Participation in God (ca. 180):*

Being ignorant of him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of his gift, which is eternal life; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh. . . . He undoubtedly speaks these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God. . . . The Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of Man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality.

*Ag. Her.*, bk. 3, chap. 19, par. 1 (ANF, vol. 1, 448, translation slightly modified)

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nity past, through the loving presence of the Father with the Son (and the Holy Spirit, but again, Jesus does not mention him here). After God made the world and placed human beings in it, his desire for us was that we share that same glorious love with him and with each other. Jesus prays that those who follow him may be one with each other in the same way that he is one with the Father.

The relationship between the Father and the Son that Jesus describes here provides the basis for some of the early church’s best reflection on the concept of *theōsis*, or participation in God. The four church fathers on whom I am concentrating the most—Irenaeus in the second century, Athanasius in the fourth century, and Augustine and Cyril of Alexandria in the fifth century—all recognize that participation in God, or “becoming divine,” involves a variety of aspects, such as be-

coming incorruptible as God is incorruptible. But all four of them recognize that the central aspect of *theōsis*—and thus the heart of the bond between God’s life and human life—lies in our adoption into Christ’s sonship with the Father. In the sidebar (previous page) from Irenaeus, in which he claims that those who deny the reality of the incarnation have no salvation, notice that in salvation we receive the Logos (God the Son) himself. We do not simply receive something that he gives us, because the Son gives us his very self. And the essence of this gift of himself is that we become sons and daughters of God. We are adopted

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*Athanasius on Adopted Sonship (ca. 358):*

God, being first Creator, next, as has been said, becomes Father of men, because of his Word dwelling in them. But in the case of the Word the reverse; for God, being his Father by nature, becomes afterward both his Creator and Maker, when the Word puts on that flesh which was created and made, and becomes man. For, as men, receiving the Spirit of the Son, become children through him, so the Word of God, when he himself puts on the flesh of man, then is said both to be created and to have been made. If then we are by nature sons [of God], then is he by nature creature and work; but if we become sons [of God] by adoption and grace, then has the Word also, when in grace toward us he became man, said “The Lord created me.”

*Ag. Arian., bk. 2, par. 61 (NPNF<sup>2</sup>, vol. 4, 381)*

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into the same relationship he has with God the Father—into his own sonship with the Father. Incorruption and immortality (as well as other benefits of salvation) flow from the gift of God the Son himself; they are not the primary aspects of *theōsis*.

Similarly, Athanasius links participation in God to the gift of divine sonship or adoption, and in doing so, he carefully distinguishes God the Son from believers. In the sidebar just above, notice that the Logos, who was always the natural Son of God, became human, in order that we, who were not sons and daughters of God, might become

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*Augustine on Jesus' Prayer That Believers All Be One (ca. 410):*

He [Jesus] is declaring his divinity, consubstantial with the Father . . . in his own proper way, that is, in the consubstantial equality of the same substance, and he wants his disciples to be one in him, because they cannot be one in themselves, split as they are from each other by clashing wills and desires, and the uncleanness of their sins. . . . Just as Father and Son are one not only by equality of substance but also by identity of will, so these men, for whom the Son is mediator with God, might be one not only by being of the same nature, but also by being bound in the fellowship of the same love.

*On Trin.*, bk. 4, chap. 12 (Hill, 161)

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such. We were created as human beings and have become divine by sharing in the Son's relationship to the Father. The means to this end was the Son's action of becoming one of us through the incarnation. Furthermore, the sidebar just above from Augustine shows that he interprets Jesus' prayer in John 17 in a closely analogous way.

Perhaps the most insightful reflection on this idea during the early church comes from the fifth-century father Cyril of Alexandria, who follows Irenaeus and Athanasius in making adoption into the Son's relationship to the Father the key aspect of *theōsis*. Like Athanasius, but with much more precision, Cyril distinguishes two kinds of unity between

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*Cyril of Alexandria on the Difference Between Christ and Christians (ca. 425):*

Shall we then abandon what we are by nature and mount up to the divine and unutterable essence, and shall we depose the Word of God from his very sonship and sit in place of him with the Father and make the grace of him who honors us a pretext for impiety? May it never be! Rather, the Son will remain unchangeably in that condition in which he is, but we, adopted into sonship and gods by grace, shall not be ignorant of what we are.

*Com. Jn.*, bk. 1, chap. 9 (Pusey, 86, translation modified)

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the Father and the Son. The first is a unity of substance, and the Father and the Son do not share this kind of unity with us in any way whatsoever. The second, though, is a unity of love or fellowship that the Father and the Son have enjoyed from all eternity precisely because of their

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*Cyril of Alexandria on the Similarity Between Christ and Christians (ca. 425):*

When he had said that authority was given to them from him who is by nature Son to become sons of God, and had hereby first introduced that which is of adoption and grace, he can afterward add without danger [of misunderstanding] that they were begotten of God, in order that he might show the greatness of the grace which was conferred on them, gathering as it were into natural fellowship [*oikeiotēs physikē*] those who were alien from God the Father, and raising up the slaves to the nobility of their Lord, on account of his warm love toward them.

*Com. Jn.*, bk. 1, chap. 9 (Pusey, 106, translation modified)

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unity of substance. Cyril argues that God does share this kind of unity with us. In the sidebar (previous page) on the difference between Christ and Christians, notice that Cyril insists that we in no way mount up to the level of God. Instead we are adopted as daughters and sons of God by grace, not by nature and in essence, as Christ is. In the sidebar just above, on the similarity between Christ and Christians, notice that Cyril again clearly maintains the distinction between Christians and God, but at the same time he insists that we share in the natural fellowship between the Son and the Father. According to Cyril, we share by grace in the same fellowship or love that the persons of the Trinity share by nature. This is why Jesus can pray that believers may be one in the same way the Father and the Son are one. The Father and the Son are one in two ways, and we can be one with the Trinity and with each other in one of those two ways, by sharing in their fellowship of love.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>In fact, Cyril develops his own technical terms to distinguish these two kinds of unity. He uses the Greek word *idiotēs* to refer to the identity of substance or nature between the persons of

## CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have looked in some detail at Jesus' poignant final words to his disciples before his death, and I have argued that what Jesus says here is a key to understanding how Christian doctrine and Christian practice relate to each other. The heart of Christian faith is the eternal relationship that has characterized the persons of the Trinity, and Jesus explicitly describes the relationship between God the Father and himself, God the Son. This relationship links God's life to our lives, precisely because our lives are meant to be a sharing in that relationship. And in what I consider to be the best strand of patristic thought, our sharing in the Father-Son relationship is at the center of what it means for us to participate in God. However, what Jesus says here—as well as what church fathers such as Irenaeus, Athanasius and Cyril write about Christ—requires a great deal more explanation than I have given so far. What he says raises questions about God (How can he be one God if the Father and Son are treated so distinctly?), about the difference between Christianity and other religions (Is Christianity really monotheistic, given this sharp distinction between the Father and the Son?), and about what it means to be a Christian (Are we really supposed to be in God, and what does that even mean?). In the next chapter, I will attempt to address these questions and to explain more fully the link between the life of the Trinity and Christian life.

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the Trinity. Father, Son and Spirit share *idiotēs* (identity of nature) with one another because they are the same God, the same being. Furthermore, Cyril uses the word *oikeiotēs* to refer to the unity of love and fellowship that binds the persons of the Trinity together. Even more strikingly, Cyril uses the phrase *oikeiotēs physikē* or “natural fellowship” to refer to the unity of love that the persons of the Trinity share precisely because they are of the same substance. They share *oikeiotēs physikē* (natural fellowship) because they share *idiotēs* (identity of nature). Armed with this distinction, Cyril insists that Christians do not in any way whatsoever share the *idiotēs* (identity of nature) of the Trinity (that would be pantheism), but in spite of this, we do share in God's *oikeiotēs* (fellowship). For a comprehensive explanation of Cyril's use of *idiotēs* and *oikeiotēs* to lay out his understanding of our participation in God's fellowship, see Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 3.