



The
LIFE
— *of* —
FAITH

An introduction
to Christian doctrine

PETER F. JENSEN

The Life of Faith is an introductory systematic theology that simultaneously cuts its own swathe and sustains traditional confessional evangelical theology. The fruit of a master teacher who has spent decades serving theological students, the book does not follow the traditional loci of systematic theology, but has been shaped by the form of biblical theology developed at Moore Theological College. It is only a fraction of the length of traditional magisterial volumes (e.g. Shedd, Hodge, Bavinck, Berkhof), while being more overtly edifying. The work has the freshness of an author who in the 21st century is still engaging in evangelism: it smells of the gospel, of ‘gospelizing’, rather more than of the library, even while readers will sense the author’s allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles. This is an excellent book for those just starting out in serious study of theology, and for those who want a refresher.

D. A. Carson

Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School, Deerfield, IL

Students of the Bible are indebted to Dr Peter Jensen’s clear, concise and thoroughly readable introduction to Christian doctrine. After 25 years of teaching theological students, Dr Jensen is well across the nuances and challenges of explaining the Bible’s core focus and the appropriate human response, namely, a life of faith. This volume will be an asset to all who desire a deeper understanding of God and his word.

Dr Glenn N. Davies

Former Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

Every generation needs its own restatement and application of the whole sweep of biblical doctrine, and in *The Life of Faith* we are in the hands of a master pastor–teacher. Based on a lifetime of personal discipleship and theological study, Peter Jensen has provided us with a wonderfully accessible, heartwarming exposition of the gospel of Christ—with all that flows from it in Christian experience—that is both comprehensive and panoramic. Particular strengths include its logical clarity in argument, its engagement with contemporary issues and distortions, both cultural and theological, its penetrating correctives of “our own perceptions shaped by sinful human ideas”, but above all its unapologetic commitment to the truth and unity of the Scriptures, with Christ as their focus. The glory of God shines from these pages, causing one’s spirit to lift in praise and thanksgiving. You will want to come back to it again and again!

David Jackman

Founding Director, Cornhill Training Course, London
Former President, The Proclamation Trust, London

In 27 crisp and concise chapters, Peter Jensen surveys Christian doctrine, relying on the gospel as the essential source of knowledge of God, biblical theology as the pattern of his study, and personal and social application as the essential concomitant of the apprehension of theological truth. Dr Jensen offers his reader a masterful tour of the sweep of biblical doctrine with clarity, pastoral as well as theological insight, and the sense of his own warm companionship as a fellow learner at the feet of a common Master, who rules his people by his Spirit-breathed word. I warmly commend this immensely useful volume to parents teaching their older children, those involved in discipling new or mature believers, small-group Bible study leaders, and pastors thinking of offering a doctrinal

sermon series or providing training to all sorts of ‘ministers of the word’ in a local church setting.

Kanishka Raffel

Anglican Archbishop of Sydney

This is a magnificent book. There is gold on every page. For those who benefitted from the blessing of being taught by Peter Jensen at Moore College it will be a must-have—if only to remind of privileges once enjoyed. Those who missed such riches now can play catch up. Knowledge of God is the beautiful theme—through the Scriptures, in salvation, as Lord and by faith. This is no dry textbook. Every page drives towards practical knowledge of the living God. It will fill your mind, delight your soul and, above all, enrich your relationship with God.

William Taylor

Senior Minister, St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London

Those of us familiar with Peter Jensen’s teaching of Christian doctrine at Moore College for more than a quarter of a century will rejoice that the benefit we received can now be enjoyed by everyone who reads this book. Peter has always been known to us as a deep and rich thinker, one who penetrates to the heart of theological matters, bringing to them a clarity of expression and an unswerving faithfulness to the word of God. In this volume, Peter teaches us to think out from the gospel, to test everything against the Scriptures, and to pause regularly to give thanks to the God who created us and saved us in Jesus Christ. Here is theology that warms the heart, directs the mind, and feeds the soul.

Mark Thompson

Principal, Moore Theological College, Sydney

“Love God with all your mind.” One of the features of Christ’s quotation of the Old Testament command “love the LORD your God” is that he adds the words, “with all your mind” (e.g. Mark 12:30). Peter Jensen’s introduction to theology will help you do that it. It is full of godly wisdom about God and the gospel, and is persuasive, pastoral, and practical.

Peter Adam

Vicar Emeritus, St Jude’s Carlton, Melbourne
Former Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne

It is with great delight that I see *The Life of Faith* become available for the strengthening of Christ’s people. The work of one of Australia’s foremost theological educators and theologians, these studies began life as lecture notes used to help form a generation of pastors and Christian leaders, and many of us who experienced those lectures can testify to their effectiveness. These studies, having been forged and developed over decades of actual use and now completely reworked and updated into book form, are a great resource for anyone wanting a solid foundation in the Christian faith. This book combines a concern to express biblical orthodoxy in a fresh and insightful way with a blending of a pastoral heart and warmth with wisdom and gospel clarity. *The Life of Faith* is well worth anyone’s time to read and digest so as to grow in their knowledge and love of God and his saving ways.

Mark Baddeley

Senior Lecturer, Systematic Theology, Queensland Theological College, Brisbane

Peter Jensen's aim in this work is to summarize what the Bible teaches—in other words, to present the Bible's doctrine. Readers will deepen their knowledge of the Bible, learning a sound way of reading it and applying it. Jensen is a master teacher. There is an admirable recognition of Scripture as a covenantal book provided by God to his people, with careful attention given to the biblical plotline. Even so, the insights of great ones of the Christian past are not neglected. Clarity of expression and acute theological insight characterize the whole project. A very fine work. I could sum it up as John Calvin meets Broughton Knox.

Graham Cole

Emeritus Dean and Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL

This work is the result of years of theological reflection. Informed by various sociopolitical, cultural, theological and scholarly developments in the past two centuries, it presents a strong case for Reformed theology in the 21st century. Those of us who grew up with Reformed theology in the 20th century will find this book refreshing. It serves as a reminder not only of our core beliefs, but also of what an informed and thought-through Reformed theology should look like today in order to be relevant and yet faithful to its foundational premises.

Bishop Jensen shows, compellingly, why some of the 'newer' scholarly discoveries have failed to sway him from his Reformed roots. He demonstrates how he has considered these new discoveries and given them fair considerations. For example, his treatment of biblical criticism shows how he welcomes scholarly advancements without compromising his belief that the Bible is the word of God.

Bishop Jensen presents his theology to us systematically, biblically, accessibly, and concisely. Its organization helps readers to see

the contours, the width and the depth of his thought, all of which come together to form a theological framework that will bring great benefit to new learners of theology. I would highly recommend this book to those who wish to find an entry-level introduction to systematic theology.

Khee-Vun Lin

Principal, Anglican Training Institute, Sabah, Malaysia

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The Life of Faith

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To my three beloved sons,
Michael, Stephen and David

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INTRODUCTION

This book is an introduction to Christian doctrine. For many years now, I have initiated beginners at various theological colleges into this subject. The material itself arose from my long engagement with theological students as they began their studies at Moore College in Sydney, where our aim was to provide an introductory overview which would firmly ground the study of Christian doctrine in the Scriptures. It was, of course, fully supplemented by lectures which went beyond the content of this book. At the same time, other learning was being done in ancillary subjects such as Early Church History and Philosophy, as well as the biblical studies. We always sought to be a fellowship of teachers dedicated to sharing the knowledge of God with one another and with the students so that together we could make God known in the world.

The chief aim of this book, then, is to summarize what the Bible teaches (its 'doctrine') about the great topics it contains. Doctrine seeks to extend our knowledge of the Bible and help us to understand it fully and accurately. It is an essential method of reading and applying the Bible. I have tried to show what the Bible teaches and how the different subjects interrelate with each other. I also aim to introduce the voices of those who, down through Christian history, have read the same Bible and had insights which we need to embrace.

My aim is to write in such a way that you can read the book

through, chapter by chapter. It is not a textbook as such, although you can consult it on various issues. But I am hoping to make the subject coherent and engaging.

It will help to spend a moment familiarizing yourself with the book's contents pages before you begin, in order to grasp the overall shape of the material and be aware of its aims. Each chapter begins with a 'key concept' that summarizes the heart of the topic. To help you catch the book's flow of ideas, these key concepts are gathered together at the beginning of each of the three parts.

At the end of each chapter, I have included a range of material to stimulate further thought, and an indication of where further work on the topic may lead. The quotations at the conclusion of each chapter are not necessarily directly linked to the topic under discussion; in some cases, they are simply intended to introduce you to some of the riches of our Christian and cultural heritage. The questions for further thought offer a variety of material: many are designed to help you summarize and reflect on what the chapter has covered; others will require you to consider ideas about which little has been said, in the hope that this opens up avenues for future learning. Not all of them are intended to be easily answered!

There is, of course, so much more that needs to be said. To help you move forward, I have continually referred to three other authors at the end of each chapter, and tried to relate their writings to the themes as they unfold. The books that I have used are:

- Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A biblical and systematic theology* (Crossway, 2012)
- Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core doctrines for Christian disciples* (Zondervan, 2012)
- Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A handbook of Christian belief* (IVP, third edition, 2013)

Milne is from the Baptist tradition, Horton from the Reformed, and Bray from the Anglican. All are expounding Reformed Protestant theology in their own way and at slightly different levels. They certainly do not necessarily agree with each other, or with me, about everything. Each of these books will take you on to the next stage of your study and answer many of the questions which I am not able to take up in this introductory volume.

I also make frequent reference to works by Dr JI Packer, especially his *Concise Theology: A guide to historic Christian beliefs* (Tyndale, 2001), which is a simple (but never simplistic) way in to thinking about these great themes.

Any usefulness this volume has will be found in three elements. First, it concentrates on the indispensable biblical basis of the subject. Second, it orders Christian doctrine by the shape and flow of what may be called ‘biblical theology’. Third, it suggests ways in which readers can advance in further knowledge of the subject, and so paves the way for ongoing growth.

We could have started the study of doctrine from a historical or contemporary point. But I have begun with the Bible because I hold it to be God’s word, his revelation of himself and of his purposes in the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope you share this conviction—or at least that you share it by the time you’ve finished using this book. It is good to acquire the habit of turning to the Bible first, because it remains the supreme source and touchstone of truth.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7). Humility before the Lord is the prerequisite to knowing God. My prayer for us all is that we will begin and end with the fear of the Lord that leads to wisdom.

PART ONE



KNOWING
THE GOD WHO
CREATES



- We live to know God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the means by which we come to know him.
- We know God only because he makes himself known to us.
- God's revelation of himself is not simply through creation; he has spoken, and his speech is in Scripture. Through Scripture, God rules over us.
- Scripture is inspired by God, and hence a perfect and sufficient unity.
- Scripture is inspired by God, and hence infallible and inerrant.
- The God we know reveals himself to be the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- The God we know is utterly free from all limitations except those inherent in his own righteous character.
- The God we know has, from his own righteous character, created all things and committed himself to the welfare and salvation of his creation.
- The God we know is both glorious and gracious in his righteousness.

KNOWING GOD IN THE GOSPEL

Key concept: We live to know God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the means by which we come to know him.

1. Introduction: Knowing God

God is, and we may know him. That is the Christian claim.

This is a bold assertion, especially at the present time. Scepticism is the contemporary mood; atheism has become a popular crusade; agnosticism is a fashionable mindset. It is common to believe that if there is a God, he is virtually unknowable. But if we can in fact know God, especially the God who is described in the Bible, it would transform our lives, answering many of life's riddles and making it possible for us to know how we are expected to live as human beings.

Indeed, the Bible asserts that knowing God is the goal or purpose of human existence—not just knowing that he exists or what he is like, but entering into a personal relationship with him. As Jesus said, “this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Here is

the good news: personal and corporate fulfilment is possible, and our vision of the future is filled with a sure and wonderful hope.

But how can we know the invisible and transcendent God? How can we know that he is there or that he has any interest in us?

The answer is, through Jesus Christ.

The confidence of the New Testament that we may know God arises from Jesus Christ's claim that he was sent by God, and from the belief of his followers that he spoke the truth. This is apparent from any reading of the New Testament itself. The central Christian message was called "the word of God", or "the gospel". The early Christians taught that when men and women received the gospel and believed it, they would come to know the true and living God. This is what we have seen in John 17:3. It is also what we see in the teaching of the apostle Paul.

Paul believed that God had spoken a word, and that by the publication and reception of that word we can come to know God. In a seminal passage, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, he called this word "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (v 4) and said that it had the power to provide "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (v 6). The essential content of this gospel was simply stated: "Jesus Christ as Lord" (v 5). John speaks of gaining "eternal life" through the knowledge of God, while Paul describes such life in terms of "light" and "glory". The gospel saves by relating us to God.

The Bible teaches that the fundamental human problem is not ignorance as to whether there is a God, but a profound alienation from God which has left us in darkness. Thus, the unbelieving are blinded by Satan and perishing under the righteous judgement of God (2 Cor 4:3-4). Their basic difficulty is not intellectual, but moral, spiritual and relational. That is why the biblical message is not a reasoned argument setting out the proofs of God's existence. It is not opposed to reason—indeed, it appeals to reason—though it also assumes the distortion of human thought through pride and self-sufficiency. Instead, the biblical message is the disclosure of one

person to another—of God to us. Only thus can we be reconciled to God and so have eternal life.

We will look again at these matters in due course. For now, however, we only need to notice that as a matter of history, the authorized Christian teachers followed the lead of Jesus Christ himself and centred their message on what they called the gospel of Jesus Christ, which, they claimed, introduced people to a salvation-giving knowledge of God.

What was the content of this gospel and why should it be the instrument of human salvation? Let us start with Jesus himself, and his use of the word “gospel”.

2. The gospel of the kingdom

In what was probably the first written Gospel, Mark, the word “gospel” appears in the opening sentence.¹ His whole book is described as “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1), and he records Jesus using the same word in his summary of Jesus’ teaching in 1:15:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (vv 14-15)

Matthew’s Gospel agrees and adds that John the Baptist had already preached the same message of the kingdom (Matt 3:2). In addition, however, John identified Jesus as the one who was anointed to bring the Spirit of blessing and the fire of judgement (3:11-12). Of course, both John and Jesus were speaking to an audience who understood

1 Throughout this book, I will follow the convention of referring to the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as ‘Gospels’ (capital G), while the message will be referred to as the ‘gospel’ (small g).

their message of a coming kingdom; they were speaking directly to the powerful hopes of their Jewish contemporaries. These hopes arose from the promises God made in the Old Testament and were sharpened by their current experience of being under the rule of alien kings and lords.

The opening of Mark's Gospel is so significant that it is worth examining his record of Jesus' teaching very carefully. As we do, we see the following six features: that Jesus preached; that he preached the gospel; that he announced a coming kingdom; that the kingdom was the kingdom of God; that it was imminent; and that repentance and faith were called for as a means of being prepared.

Let us take each of these six elements in turn.

First, Jesus "*preached*" or 'heralded' his gospel—that is, he announced it before he argued for it. This tells us something about the nature of Jesus' gospel. It is the announcement of a coming event, and hence must first be preached before discussion is entered into. The stories of Jesus reveal that he did discuss, argue and question. But his first duty was to preach (cf. Mark 1:38). He was a herald rather than a philosopher, guru or moralist.

Second, Jesus *preached a "gospel"*—that is, he gave 'glad tidings' before he gave abstract ideas or maxims about how to live. The word "gospel" itself contains the idea of 'news' or 'tidings' and is therefore appropriate for announcing a momentous event. The news gave rise to explanations, claims and maxims, but its essence is an event, and hence it is reported in a document called a Gospel.

Third, Jesus *announced the kingdom*—that is, the word "kingdom" implies a monarch's 'rule' or 'reign'. It was an event to be declared because he was announcing an imminent convulsion in the history of his nation, Israel, and then the world. Jesus is speaking here of God's plans for the whole world. God's reign, while almighty and unassailable from one point of view, was disputed and rejected from another. The story of Adam's refusal to obey God stood at the beginning of the Bible as a constant reminder that this was the cur-

rent alienated state of humanity. Israel was deeply conscious of this. Her own oppressed circumstances, under the rule of a foreign empire, exemplified both the hostility of the nations to God's ways and also the judgement of God against her. To the ears of his hearers, tuned by John the Baptist and conscious of such prophets as Daniel, Jesus was announcing that God would soon reverse their historical circumstances and begin to rule the world through Israel as he had promised in the Scriptures. "The time is fulfilled", said Jesus, because the promises of God have reached their goal at this moment and in this person.

Fourth, Jesus *announced the kingdom of God*—that is, the coming event was the gift of God before it was the work of human beings. The word "kingdom" has sometimes suggested to Christians that Jesus' interest was in a new political and social order, and they have then taken the next step to assuming that the new order is to be created by the work of our hands. True, there can be no doubt that God's reign has had profound political and social consequences in this world; nor can there be any doubt that we have our part to play in contributing to these blessings by doing the good works which he has prepared for us to walk in. But the fact that God's kingdom is at stake here reminds us that the human side is a response, and it is, first of all, the response of repentance and faith. All human response is partial and inadequate. But we must also remember that he described his kingdom as being "not of this world" (John 18:36). We do not bring in his kingdom; we do not create it. It his work, not ours.

Fifth, Jesus *warned that the kingdom was near*—that is, it remained in the future rather than the present, but was close rather than remote. This nearness gave his exhortation its urgency. As the Gospel narrative of Jesus' work and words developed, however, it became clear that the 'nearness' of the kingdom had an unexpected aspect. The kingdom was to be regarded as both present and future (see, for example, Mark 4:26-32). As time goes on, it is revealed that

we are dealing with two comings of Christ. By his first coming, he introduces the kingdom (Luke 17:21); at his second coming, the kingdom arrives in its finality. Between these two events, Christ rules over his church and the world (Eph 1:15-22; 1 Cor 15:20-28).

Thus, in his plans, the present historical age will one day be succeeded by a marvellous new age; there will be such a sharp break in the continuity of history that a whole new order will emerge. Scripture calls this “the age to come”, or “eternal life”, or “new heavens and a new earth”. But the preaching of Jesus announced the invasion of the age to come into the present age. The two ages, present and future, co-exist until his return, when the old age will disappear and the new will be here in its completeness and glory.

Sixth, Jesus *demanded repentance and faith in the light of the kingdom*—that is, the kingdom or lordship of God must be received before it can be lived. There was a tendency in Israel to believe that mere membership of the covenant people assured the individual of a place in the kingdom. Jesus and John both warned powerfully that the appropriate response to their announcement was repentance and faith—a radical inward change of allegiance, applicable both to the leader and the outcast. This alone could qualify even the Israelites, the children of Abraham by biological descent, for acceptance in God’s kingdom and so reconciliation with God. Even genetic relationship to Jesus himself was to be no substitute for this (Mark 3:31-35). Of course, entrance to the kingdom was to be followed by a life of obedience to God the king.

Jesus’ initial challenge to Israel, his summons to repentance and faith in light of the coming kingdom, remains at the heart of the gospel, but the rest of the New Testament develops, enriches and explains it. The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus demonstrated both the triumph of the kingdom and the person of the king, not least in his outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, in due course it is revealed that the message of the gospel was for all people, not just Israel (Acts 1:8). Furthermore, as Jesus’ words about

fulfilment demonstrate, the gospel is inextricably connected to the existing Scriptures of the Old Testament. To comprehend the fullness of the gospel, therefore, we must turn to the teaching of the whole of Scripture.

3. The kingdom of the gospel

God rules the world by his powerful word. In the original creation story, God effortlessly brought all things to be merely through his word. The Old Testament frequently celebrates the continued rule or kingdom of God over all creation (e.g. Psalm 93). In the garden of Eden he is also depicted as the sovereign Lord, reigning over his human creation by his word. The rebellious fall of Adam and Eve is a rejection of his word and hence his rule. The successive covenant relationships with Abraham, Israel and the Davidic kings is the re-assertion of his sovereignty by his word. A covenant is a word of promise binding parties together in relationship.

The Old Testament covenants such as the ones between the Lord and Abraham, Israel and David are, however, incomplete and inadequate. They bring a knowledge of God, although it is fitful and shadowy. But they also contain promises of better things to come, when God will once more assert his public rule and the knowledge of God will be deep and satisfying (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:22-36; Dan 2:36-45). Sometimes these promises are connected with one who appears to be a supreme human ruler in the line of David—a ‘Messiah’ or ‘Christ’ (see, for example, Isaiah 11:1-11).

The New Testament asserts the eventual complete and public triumph of God the King and a new creation in which righteousness dwells (e.g. Rev 20:11-21:1; 2 Pet 3:13). But the path to these triumphs is not an easy one, for it involves the fire of judgement, as was foreshadowed and experienced many times in the Old Testament. When Jesus announces the kingdom, he is, among other things, announcing judgement. As a result of human rebellion, the

way to life lies through death. Human history is the working out of both grace and judgement until God's appointed end. The kingdom *has* come, but the kingdom *will* come.

In a sense, the Old Testament prophets said as much as all this. But the New Testament message is qualitatively different—and the difference is Jesus. In him, the promises and purposes of God have come to fruition (2 Cor 1:18-20).

4. The king in the gospel

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as “the Christ”, that is, the one who fulfils all the promises of God. Jesus put himself at the centre of his own message in an astonishing way. His parables of the kingdom revealed that, up to that point, the kingdom had come in seed, although not in fullness (e.g. Mark 4). They foreshadowed both the judgement and salvation of God.

The New Testament describes the death of Jesus in terms of God's judgement. Where Israel and the world should have suffered judgement, he drinks the cup of God's wrath alone (Mark 14:36) and so gives his life “as a ransom for many” (10:45). As with other divine judgements in the past, new life blossoms forth; here, however, the one person judged is such that the whole of history hinges on his death, and a new age bursts into the old with his resurrection. The forces of the old age seek “signs and ... wisdom”, but the Christian gospel must, from now on, be the message of a crucified Lord (1 Cor 1:18-31), mightier than any miracle and wiser than the wisest of human beings.

The truth about Jesus is, of course, more extraordinary than our hearts can imagine, for he is the Lord of Glory, crucified by the rulers of this age (1 Cor 2:8-9), the one who receives the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:10) and gives the Spirit to his followers (Acts 2:33). In Jesus Christ, God is re-asserting his rule and so saving us; Jesus is the last Adam, the true image of God, the true ruler of the world,

and the Son of God himself, from all eternity with God and God (John 1:18; 1 Cor 15:45; Col 1:15). Only as both God and man can he be Saviour.

It is natural, therefore, that the final presentation of Christ in the New Testament is not even the crucified or risen Christ, but the Christ who is seated at the right hand of God— the Christ who is called both Lord and King (Rev 19:16). He is only thus because he died and rose again; but in this historical time between his ascension and his return, he reigns as ‘God’s man’, until all his enemies are defeated and the kingdom of Christ becomes the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor 15:20-28).

This is the reason that the New Testament evangelists could preach both “the kingdom” and “the Christ” (Acts 20:25, 8:5). These are not separate entities. When Paul asserts that he preaches Jesus Christ as Lord and King, he is doing nothing else than proclaiming the kingdom (cf. Acts 17:7; 2 Cor 4:5). In so doing, he makes exactly the same demand as Jesus did, namely entry into the kingdom through repentance and faith (Acts 20:21), although the focus of that faith is now explicitly Jesus. For Jesus, the kingdom is as precious as a treasure hidden in a field (Matt 13:44); for Paul, every human privilege was as garbage compared with “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil 3:8). Jesus is the Lord of God’s kingdom.

5. The blessings of the gospel

In the passage just cited, Paul claims to know “Christ Jesus my Lord”. This is not at all alien to knowing God, for to know Christ is to know God (see John 1:18, 17:3; 2 Cor 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5). In Christ, the Father discloses himself to us and invites relationship. It is by sending forth the Spirit of his Son that God enables us to call him Father (Gal 4:6). The whole of Scripture is a many-sided testimony to the possibilities of this knowledge, or relationship, until it

reaches an extraordinary fruition in the age to come (1 Cor 13:12). For now, the blessings of the gospel are ours “in Christ”.

Much to the surprise of the original disciples, the blessings are available to all—Jew and Gentile alike—on the same terms of repentance and faith. The failure of Israel to know its Lord has paradoxically led to worldwide blessing in line with God’s stated intentions (Gal 3:8; Romans 11).

Repentance and faith are called for because they are the basic relational attitudes essential for the knowledge of God. The New Testament contrasts them with the good works by which sinful humanity is forever trying to please God while keeping him at a distance (e.g. Eph 2:8-9). Nonetheless, it is a blessing of the gospel that the life of faith is one of good works which glorify God and re-assert our true humanity by showing what we were meant to be (Eph 2:10, 4:22-24).

Constant amongst the blessings of the gospel mentioned in the New Testament is forgiveness. Since the warning of judgement to come is so central to the preaching of the kingdom, it is not at all surprising that cleansing from sin, or forgiveness, should be so prominent (e.g. Acts 5:31, 10:42-43). The wonderful truth is that the judgement of the end is brought forward into this age and we are acquitted in this present time through faith in Christ.

Our forgiveness entails reconciliation with God brought about by the Spirit of God. By the Spirit, new life comes; by the Spirit, God himself resides within us; by the Spirit, we call God our Father and Jesus our Lord; by the coming of the Spirit, we know that God has accepted lost Gentiles; in the power of the Spirit, we bear fruit that the law on its own could not produce; and by the Spirit, we know that one day our fulfilment will come (see John 3:1-8, 7:37-39, 14:16-20; Rom 8:15; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 5:22-23; Eph 1:13-14). The Spirit is indeed the power of the age to come at work in this present evil age. He is never in competition with God’s word, for he is the author and interpreter of that precious gift.

6. Conclusion

We began with the bold biblical claim that God is, and we may know him through the gospel. And we have begun to see what the message of the gospel is. But are there not other ways of coming to know God? Do we not believe in God through reason, or through experience, for example? The biblical teaching certainly refers to such possibilities. And in the next chapter we will discuss their strengths and limitations. But the Bible itself leaves us virtually no alternative than to place greatest weight in assessing its truth claims on the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is how we regard him, as we hear the message about him preached, that will determine our view of God and the world. Indeed the business of gospel preaching is to provide a defence and confirmation of the gospel by relating it in the language of the hearers to their experience and knowledge. But since the gospel is personal knowledge which demands of proud humans that they submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, we are conscious that reason and experience will not provide the final explanation as to why a person believes or not. That is why the theme of the next chapter is knowing God by God.

Because the gospel is the starting point for the Christian knowledge of God, I have taken that as the beginning point for our study of doctrine. Furthermore, it introduces us immediately to the flow of God's salvation history and its ultimate goal. The life of faith is lived between the first and second comings of Christ, and unless we understand where we are, what we have, and what our hope is, we will be impoverished. In the chapters that follow, we will never be far from this beginning or from the great end that lies in store for us.

Key verse

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

Quotation

“Good, mery, glad and joyfull tydinge, that maketh a mannes heart glad, and maketh hym synge, daunce, and leepe for joye.” (William Tyndale [1494-1536, Bible translator and martyr] on the meaning of the word ‘gospel’, Prologue to the New Testament)

Key terms

- Gospel
- Kingdom of God
- Covenant

For further thought

- What other starting points might people propose in their study of doctrine? From what we have seen in this chapter, why should we begin with the gospel?
- “God is”—or, as he says about himself, “I am”. Does this mean more than simply “God exists”? How might it differentiate God from human beings and from the rest of creation?
- John Calvin’s Geneva Catechism begins: “What is the chief end of human life? To know God by whom men were created.” Another catechism begins: “What is the purpose of your life? To love God as he loves me.” The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Why the differences? Which do you prefer?
- Have you seen examples of Christians over-emphasising the connection between God’s kingdom and “a new political and social order”? What damage has this done?

For further reading

- For chapters 1-9 of this book, see JI Packer, *Concise Theology*, part 1
- G Bray, *God is Love*, chapter 1
- M Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, introduction (‘Why Study Theology?’)
- B Milne, *Know the Truth*, chapter 1