

## What Is Gracious Christianity?

We have a gracious gospel. The good news that Jesus proclaimed is that God is graciously disposed toward us. God loves us, and, indeed, God loves everyone and every good thing in this wonderful world in which we live. We are expected to do the same. The gospel invites us to mimic God's own graciousness in our lives. It calls us to become so enveloped in God's graciousness that we become conduits of God's grace and love for others. Graciousness is a nonnegotiable dimension of Christian faith. It goes to the very core of the gospel. It is what makes the gospel good news.

## Defining Terms

The terms related to the word *grace* (including *graceful* and *gracious* and their various derivatives) play an important role in Christian faith, but the meaning of these terms is not always clear. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, three pages are needed to explain the twenty-eight meanings attached to the single word *grace*. The words *gracious* and *graceful* require another two pages or more. The meanings of the word *grace* include "the quality of producing favorable impressions," a "sense of duty or propriety," and "prayer said before meals," but in this book the term is linked much more closely with the eleventh meaning in the dictionary: "the free and unmerited favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings." *Grace* describes the experience of receiving God's love.

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indicating that someone has “a pleasing or attractive quality” or is socially refined and “endowed with charm.” These adjectives can also signify beauty, elegance, and poise. Those are all good traits, but in this book we mean something different when we use the words *graceful* and *gracious*. The kind of gracefulness and graciousness we have in mind is a response to God’s love. Graciousness is how we externalize to others the grace we have internalized from God.

Graciousness understood in this way focuses on kindness, compassion, and friendship rather than on mere attractiveness or elegance. People who are truly gracious are attractive, but their winsomeness transcends merely skin-deep beauty. Theirs is an attraction based on goodness. This is the kind of attraction that Mother Teresa possessed. Mother Teresa was far from beautiful in the glamour-magazine sense of the word, but she was clearly one of the most attractive people in the world because of her moral beauty and compassion for the poorest of the poor in

Calcutta's slums.

Who are the most graceful or gracious Christians you know? What makes them stand out as examples?

In many ways, *grace* and *love* are synonyms. To be gracious toward someone is to show that person love, but graciousness points toward love with an important qualification. Graciousness is love that never forces itself on anyone. Sometimes people almost love us to death, smothering us with their love. Usually these people genuinely care for us, but they cannot differentiate between welcome love and overbearing love. They intrude in our lives with good intentions but negative results because they pay no heed to whether we really want their help or not.

Gracious love is different. Such love does not intrude but stands ready to help only when it is appropriate, desired, and needed. When love is given graciously, it preserves our dignity and

never makes our neediness public. In a sense, graciousness could thus be defined as love offered truly lovingly, as love that makes no show of itself, as love that seeks no praise in return.

That, of course, is precisely the kind of love we have received from God, and when we understand the gracious nature of God's love for us, the only appropriate response is to love other people in the same way. And that is what we mean by gracious Christianity. It is Christianity so deeply rooted in God's love that we cannot help but love others in the same gracious way. It is cause and effect. The love and grace we receive from God are refracted through our lives and redirected toward others.

People who are truly gracious also welcome the love and care given by others. Graciousness is about being on the receiving end of love as well as on the giving end. In this sense, grace and graciousness point toward community and sociability and toward nurturing relationships among people. Gracious Christians recognize that others can be conduits of God's love to them just

as they can be messengers of God's love to others.

## Overcoming Ungraciousness

While all Christians are called to be gracious, none of us is as gracious as we should be. We get grumpy. We snipe at one another. We are sometimes downright nasty. This should not be the case, but it comes as no surprise. Christians are imperfect. We are sinners who still need to be fully redeemed. We are works in progress, but thankfully God is still active in our lives slowly making us better. Someday, by God's grace, we will become the people we were meant to be.

The goal of becoming more gracious as Christians is not, however, a matter of simply waiting for God to change us. The Christian life rarely works that way. Instead, we are called to cooperate with God's will for our lives, and we are called to actively strive to live up to the standards

to which God has called us.

Is graciousness merely a synonym for simply being nice? How much graciousness can we realistically expect from one another? Does being gracious mean we must avoid confrontation and shun all debate? Can a person be blunt and gracious at the same time?

But how do we do that? What is the pathway toward becoming more gracious followers of Jesus? Some would say the answer is simple: just do it. The Bible gives us the guidance we need: turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, forgive others when they harm us, be patient with everyone. In short, start acting more graciously right now, and with time and practice, graciousness will become a lifelong habit.

There is wisdom in that advice. If we genuinely commit ourselves to do something over and over again—in this case, to practice graciousness in all



our daily encounters with others—it can eventually become second nature. Great athletes and musicians do this all the time. Dribble a ball long enough or practice the piano often enough and you can almost do it in your sleep.

But practice alone is not always enough; sometimes we need more. For example, while all dieters try to change their eating behaviors, those who are most successful are usually the ones who also change the way they think about food and feel about themselves. Concentrating merely on behavior is not enough; we also need to pay attention to emotions and ideas.

Learning to live more graciously as Christians necessarily involves changing our behavior, for graciousness is expressed in the way we live. But becoming more gracious also requires changing misconstrued thoughts and feelings about God, the world, and other people. It is difficult to treat others with grace if we feel emotionally ill-disposed toward them; it is next to impossible to treat others with respect if our theology says it is

all right to disdain them.

How do you think doing, believing, and feeling should relate to each other in the Christian life? Is one of these—thinking, feeling, or acting—more important than the others in your own life? Are they sometimes in tension with each other?
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While the pathway toward greater graciousness in Christian faith and life involves behavior, emotions, and ideas, this book focuses primarily on the realm of ideas. Some practical comments about behavior are included, and some emotional connections hopefully will occur along the way, but the main concern is with the ideas that form the framework for living the love we profess. Within the realm of faith, this kind of framework of belief is called theology.

## **A Theology for Gracious Christianity**

This book is a theology for gracious Christianity. It is a concise but relatively comprehensive overview of what most Christians have believed about God, the world, themselves, and others for most of the past two thousand years, explaining how those beliefs encourage and support graciousness in faith and life.

While the subject is theology, we have tried to keep this text largely free of theological jargon. This book is written in plain English. Some theological texts are highly technical, and professional theologians have no need to apologize for using specialized language in their publications; such practice is common in every academic field of study. But theology is not just a discipline for specialists. All Christians are to some degree theologians, and this book is designed to be a resource for them.

Though written in plain English, this book is intended to make you think. While comprehensible, it is not necessarily simple, and it is certainly not simplistic. Thinking through the implications of faith is challenging work, and it takes effort to evaluate the world intelligently and to reflect on the meaning of the Christian message. Sometimes it is easier simply to repeat old answers without analyzing them, but graciousness requires thoughtfulness, self-awareness, and empathy. If our faith is true, knowing what we believe and why will ultimately increase our ability to listen to others with genuine fairness, respect, and compassion.

## **The Jesus Creed**

The heart of gracious Christianity is Jesus' dual commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all

your mind, and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). Theologian Scot McKnight has recently labeled this double rule of love the “Jesus creed,” and he argues that it is “the foundation of everything Jesus teaches about spiritual formation.”<sup>1</sup>

Are you familiar with any other creeds?  
How is the Jesus creed similar to or  
different from these other creeds? Does  
the Jesus creed capture the essence of  
Jesus’ life and teaching?

McKnight is not alone in grasping the importance of this “creed.” People from all over the theological spectrum are making the same point. For example, Rick Warren, who is a conservative Christian and author of the enormously popular *Purpose Driven Life*, writes, “The point of life is learning to love—God and people. Life minus love equals zero.”<sup>2</sup> Speaking from a rather different location on the theological

spectrum, the liberal biblical scholar Marcus Borg echoes Warren and McKnight. Borg calls Jesus’ dual commandment to love God and our neighbors the “great relationship,” and he says that this “remarkably simple vision” of life with God and others is the “center of a life grounded in the Bible.”<sup>3</sup>

This book takes the Jesus creed, this simple but profound core of Christian faith, and uses it as a lens to examine the various subject areas of theology. The eight chapters of this book describe what this creed has to do with:

- how we understand God and creation
- what it means to be human
- how God speaks to us
- what salvation entails
- what the Spirit does for us
- why the church exists
- how to read the Bible
- what will happen in the future

Looking at these topics from the perspective of the Jesus creed does not change the message of historic Christian faith. Instead, it refurbishes our theology, like polishing a tarnished silver tea set helps restore its original luster. Polishing a tea set does not change the shape of anything. Everything is still in the same place—spout, handle, feet, and lid—but the dullness is gone, and it shines like new. Polishing our Christian beliefs with the soft cloth of God’s love can help us renew our ways of thinking in a similar way.

## **Generous Orthodoxy and Gracious Christianity**

Love of God and neighbor has always defined the heart of Christianity, but the need to reaffirm this truth visibly and vigorously is especially urgent today. Mean-spiritedness and hate are on the rise in both America and around the globe,

and religion is often implicated. Instead of acting as a restraint, religion is sometimes the cause of tension, tirades, and terror. The title of Charles Kimball’s recent book *When Religion Becomes Evil* aptly captures that mood. Many expressions of religion are becoming more strident and shrill, including some expressions of Christianity.

What are some examples of religion becoming evil? Is it easier to discern evil looking back in history than in current events? What are warning signs that religion may be becoming evil?

Seeing this, many contemporary Christians feel a need to recover a broader and deeper orthodoxy that can keep evil more consistently at bay. Brian McLaren, in particular, has suggested that we need a more “generous orthodoxy,” and he says that this new style of orthodoxy will have to be formulated in the language of both/and rather than either/or. Thus, the rather lengthy subtitle of

his recent book is “Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/ poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist /calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian.”<sup>4</sup> McLaren’s plus signs serve as symbols of a faith that unites rather than divides and acknowledge how much we can learn from each other.

A generous Christian orthodoxy uses the Bible as its primary source and is also informed by tradition, reason, and experience. These four sources of theology are sometimes called the Wesleyan quadrilateral, but they apply to the dynamics of any Christian theology. All Christians share the Bible as their primary authority in matters of faith and life, and all Christians also appeal to tradition, reason, or experience to make their points. Tradition can take many forms. Most often we think of the creeds or confessions of faith

that we recite in our churches, but tradition also includes the songs we sing, the ways we worship, the passages of Scripture we find most helpful, the ministries of service and compassion we render to others, the Christian writers we find most compelling, and many other aspects of faith that have been handed down to us and that we are passing along to others. Reason refers to what seems logical to us and what seems blatantly illogical; it also involves the coherence of our ideas, which is an important consideration in most theology. Experience includes both specifically religious experiences (such as a dramatic conversion or the lack of such an experience) and more general life experiences (such as cultural or ethnic identity, gender, the type of work one does, and family characteristics). All these dimensions are integrated into our theological thinking, because theological thinking is holistic.

The particular way of understanding gracious Christianity in this book is not the only way to

think graciously about faith. Our views are limited by our own experiences and reasoning abilities and will be modified, augmented, and corrected by the insights of others. Our views are also shaped by our own traditions. While we draw from the broad history of Christianity (including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox perspectives), we freely admit that our own spiritual roots are Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan. This means, among other things, that we are committed to peace as a gospel imperative, to faith as necessarily lived in community, to the importance of a personal relationship with Christ, and to a spirituality that emphasizes justice and ethical decision making.

What place does the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience play in your own theology? How would you rank these items in terms of their influence on your theology?

The gracious Christianity we wish to encourage in this book is not, however, specifically Anabaptist, Pietist, or Wesleyan. The adjective *gracious* is one that all Christians can adopt. The world needs gracious Christians of every kind: gracious Baptists as well as gracious Lutherans, gracious Mennonites as well as gracious Presbyterians, gracious Catholics as well as gracious Methodists, gracious Orthodox Christians as well as gracious Pentecostals. Adding graciousness to our differing self-definitions is not meant to blur honest differences. It is meant, rather, to remind us how much we hold in common as followers of Jesus and how much we share a commitment to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Christians currently account for almost one-third of the world's people, two billion out of a global population of just over six billion. If the faith professed by those two billion Christians became even a little more gracious, the dynamics of the world community could be changed

dramatically for the better. Before it is public, however, gracious Christianity is intensely personal. We are compelled to be gracious because we have been loved so graciously by God and because we have been loved by others—the love of God usually flows to us through others. Gracious Christians participate in that cycle, giving back a small portion of the grace received from both God and others. The graciousness we funnel back into the world is only a fraction of the grace we have received, but God can use small things to accomplish great goals. In fact, God has for the most part chosen to change the world by layering small grace upon small grace, and living graciously as Christians allows us to assist in that work.

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### **God and Creation**

The Christian story begins with God as Creator and the world as creation. Our lives are enfolded within a vast and magnificent domain, and gracious Christianity is rooted in a natural sense of gratitude and awe. We are not our own makers. We are dependent on forces beyond ourselves, and we exist interdependently with everyone and everything around us. We are living in someone else's world. Our natural response, when these thoughts cross our minds, is reverence.

But Christians do not stop there. It is not simply creation that astounds us but the Creator behind the creation. Who is the Creator? What kind of God would do this? Why did God make the universe? Why and for what purposes did God

make us?

## The God Who Made the World

God did not create the world out of need or necessity. Rather, God made the world out of generous, self-giving love. Everything in the world exists because God loves it, and God's deepest will for the world is joy in the presence of its loving Creator. People do not often think of God as creating the world for joy and enjoyment, and Christians certainly do not always live in joyful awareness of God, but the Westminster Catechism gets it right when it says that our chief end and purpose is "to glorify God, and fully enjoy him forever."<sup>1</sup> Christians worship a God who desires our deepest well-being and, indeed, our joy.

God created the world beautiful and good. In

fact, the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis says that after God created the world, God looked at everything that had been made and said it was not just good but *very* good. The God who created the universe—the God who gives life to all the plants and animals and single-celled creatures that live on the earth, the God who loves every human being who walks this planet—is a God who does things *very well*.

The God who created the world is a God who delights in wonder, beauty, and joy. When God made the world, all those qualities of life were braided into the very fabric of the universe. There is now no getting them out. It is true that sin and evil have deformed God's creation, making the world we live in far from perfect. But however much we mess things up, truth, beauty, and goodness can never be fully eliminated from this world.

Is it surprising to think of the world as made for joy? Do you set aside time to
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celebrate life's goodness? How much do  
you think evil has deformed the world?  
How much goodness is left?

Some versions of Eastern Orthodox theology suggest that for God to create the world, God first had to voluntarily shrink back a bit from filling all reality in order to make space for the world to exist. God scrunched back, like people in a crowded elevator, clearing a space for something else to enter.

This way of speaking about God is metaphorical. God is spirit and does not literally take up space like a physical object. Therefore, God cannot literally shrink in order to make room for the world. But the image is winsome, and, like any good metaphor, instructive. In the act of creation, God graciously invited something else to exist—something entirely new, something different and distinct from God's own self. In an act of stunning humility, God stepped back to allow space for the world to blossom into being.

Although the notion that God somehow shrank to make room for creation is an image that does not come directly from the Bible, it is in keeping with how God later underwent a process of “self-emptying” in order to squeeze into human existence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (see Phil. 2:6-8). Both acts bespeak God's extraordinary graciousness in accommodating us. In fact, the essence of graciousness is the accommodation of others, and God modeled that in creation long before God required it of us.

The world did not, however, spring into existence all on its own simply because God opened a space where that could happen. Creation required God's active involvement. The book of Genesis says that God spoke and only then did the world begin to be. This image of God speaking the world into existence is, like the notion of shrinking, a metaphor. But in a vivid way, it depicts God as the life-giving source of the universe.

The Bible's description of creation is poetic,

couched in the language and thought forms of people living in the ancient Near East. It addresses the deep issues of the world's meaning and purpose and provides only sketchy information, at best, about the mechanics of how the world came to be. The Bible's scientific implications have, however, become a hot topic in many churches, communities, and school boards across the country. Some Christians claim that the Bible can be used to judge scientific data about the creation of the world, and, unfortunately, they sometimes make those claims in an angry and ungracious way.

How do you understand the relationship between science and faith? How much or how little science do you think is included in the Genesis story of creation?

Fertile and friendly conversation can take place between science and faith,<sup>2</sup> but science is a form

of modern scholarship, and Christians are still trying to figure out how the older language of the Bible relates to this relatively new field of human inquiry. Sometimes Christians may need to oppose certain uses or tentative conclusions of science. For example, this was clearly the case during the early 1900s when the so-called science of eugenics asserted, following the laws of evolution, that the weaker members of society should be sterilized or allowed to die so that the human species as a whole could advance more quickly. Such thinking is utterly at odds with a Christian commitment to care for those who most need our help. But Christians welcome knowledge obtained through ethical scientific research, including information about the origins and development of the natural world.

The real importance of the Genesis creation narrative is found not in its scientific details or lack of such details but in the claims it makes regarding the character of the Creator and the underlying nature of the creation. Genesis tells us

that God gave life to the world as a free and wonderful gift. Existence is a blessing. God created the world out of love and for the purposes of love. This positive perspective—a loving God who forms a delightful world—is what makes the Christian view distinctive.

## **The One and Only God**

Christianity teaches that the God who created the world is the only God who exists. Like Jews and Muslims, Christians are radical monotheists. Because of that, Christians avoid calling God their own. God does not belong to us; rather, we belong to God. And the God we belong to loves the entire world. The one and only God of the universe transcends our narrow loyalties, and when we seek to follow that God, we are inevitably stretched in the process.

God is different and bigger and better than we are. This led Karl Barth, one of the twentieth-century's greatest theologians, to refer to God as the "Wholly Other."<sup>3</sup> God is so much bigger and better than we can imagine that all our little boxes of understanding deconstruct when we try to force God into them. Several millenia ago, the writer of Isaiah depicted God as saying, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9).

Because God is Wholly Other, some Christians have adopted a style of talking about God that focuses on how much we do *not* know rather than on what we know. This is sometimes called apophatic theology or negative theology. The term *negative theology* may grate on our ears, but negative theology makes an important point: Nothing we can say about God comes close to capturing the awesomeness of God's being.

Moreover, our propensity to talk too much about God can get us into trouble. Human beings, including many Christians, are prone to refashion God in their own image. We want a pliable God who does our will, so we reenvision God in ways that fit our tastes. In the process, God's glory is often diminished and God's character distorted. Negative theology critiques these images we fashion for ourselves and suggests that silence about God may often be more appropriate than overly eager speech.

How much do we know about God? How much do we need to know? What are the most important things you would claim to know about God?

Historically, however, most Christians have felt it necessary and worthwhile to try to describe God in a positive manner, even if none of our words can adequately describe God's full perfection, splendor, and beauty. In this kind of positive

theology, the focus is on what we can validly affirm about God. So, for example, Christians have rightly said that God is the Creator. God is our Savior. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and holy. God hears our prayers; indeed, God hears the prayers of all people. And God judges justly.

Positive theology seeks to distinguish between better and more accurate ways of speaking about God and ways of speaking that may, in one way or another, partially misrepresent who God is. For example, to call God "king" misses the fact that God is also our friend and lover. The notion of kingship all by itself is too hierarchical and authoritarian to stand alone, since it does not capture these other more intimate aspects of how God relates to us. On the other hand, to call God simply a friend does not do justice to God's awesomeness and transcendence. No single word or image will ever suffice, which is why the Bible uses so many images to portray God's character and attributes.

In evaluating the language of positive theology,

many factors come into play, including intelligent biblical interpretation and logical thinking, but there is also a practical test that seems to apply. The New Testament says quite bluntly, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). If that is true, it seems like a good idea to assess what we say about God in light of this rule of love. Views about God that encourage us to love others are more likely on target than those that cause us to hate others or to hold them in disdain. An accurate view of God will never diminish our love for others.

## **The Trinity**

Christians are monotheists who believe there is one God and one God alone. Yet, historically, Christians have also been trinitarians. The Trinity describes a threeness that exists within God’s

oneness, a threeness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bound inseparably together.

God’s threeness is reflected, in some way, in the threefold activity of creation: God made the world, God sustains the world, and God will ultimately fully redeem the world and make it perfect. Christians often associate the original act of creation with God the Father, the ongoing work of sustaining the world with the Holy Spirit, and the process of redeeming the world with the Son.

But that way of speaking about God and God’s activity in the world divides things up too much. In fact, Christians have historically said it is wrong to ascribe one action to the Father and another to the Spirit or the Son. When God acts, all three persons of the Trinity act together. Thus, the Spirit and the Son are involved in creation, and the Father and the Son have a role to play in the work of sustaining the world, and the Father and the Spirit are involved in redemption.

Christians often use the personal language of Father and Son to refer to the first two persons of

the Trinity because this language portrays so powerfully the indissoluble, family-like bonds that hold the Trinity together. The point of using the language of Father and Son is not to describe God as male. The Bible includes many descriptions of God that are feminine along with masculine ones. Obviously, Jesus was a male, but God is clearly beyond gender. The language of Father and Son is a metaphorical way of describing the degree of intimacy that exists among all three persons of the Trinity.

How do you picture God? What images of God do you have in mind when you pray? In what ways does God seem male, female, or beyond gender? Do you focus more on God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit?

Over the centuries, Christians have struggled to understand the Trinity. Everyone has agreed that the full mystery of the Trinity is beyond human

comprehension, but in the long conversation of Christian faith, some descriptions have been affirmed while others have been rejected as unhelpful or simply wrong.

Among the rejected options is a position called modalism. Modalists believe the threeness of God is like water, which can exist as ice, liquid, or steam. The external form, or mode, of the water changes, but the molecular substance of the water remains the same. Similarly, God can appear externally to us as Father, Son, or Spirit, but internally God is always the same and never changes. When first suggested, modalism seemed like a reasonable analogy of God's threeness in oneness, but it was eventually rejected for two important reasons. First, it is an impersonal analogy with the potential to misrepresent the dynamic and personal reality of God. God is not a thing but a person. Second, modalism implies that the trinitarian character of God is really a matter of shape-shifting. If we followed this analogy literally, we would reach the conclusion

that God can exist only as one person of the Trinity at any given point in time. Since Christians believe God has always existed as both three and one, the water analogy, along with all similar shape-shifting analogies, was jettisoned.

One explanation of the Trinity that eventually was embraced by the mainstream Christian movement is the famous analogy of love developed by Augustine. Augustine, who was bishop of the city of Hippo in northern Africa (present-day Algeria) during the early 400s, said that the act of loving another person always involves three components: a lover, the person who is loved, and the love that the lover feels for the beloved. For love to be real, he argued, all three elements must be present. Applied to the Trinity, Augustine said, God the Father is like the lover, God the Son is like the beloved, and God the Holy Spirit is like the love that binds the lover and the beloved together.<sup>4</sup>

polytheists who worship three gods rather than one. How would you explain the Trinity to someone who thought that?

Augustine's analogy of love is not perfect—no metaphor or analogy ever is—but it is helpful because it reflects the personal nature of the Trinity and affirms the simultaneity of God's threeness and oneness. It is also valued because it makes sense of the New Testament declaration that God is love. This is a somewhat odd statement. The Bible does not say that "God loves," which is what we might expect, but rather that "God is love." What could it possibly mean for God to *be love* and not merely to *be loving*?

Augustine's analogy explains how love can be the essence of God's being. Love always involves reaching out to others. God reaches out to us in love in much the same way we love others. But Augustine says that long before God's love became extended to others, it already existed in

Some people think Christians are

infinite intensity within the Trinity itself. Love is what holds the Trinity together. It is what makes the threeness of God a singularity. The trinitarian God literally *is* love. Love is not merely one personality trait among others that describes a part of who God is. Love defines the essence of God's being, a love that God extended to the world in creation.

While love is clearly central to who God is, what other character traits would you include in a description of God? How do these other traits relate to the idea that God is love?

## Practical Implications of the Trinity

While people like Augustine made every effort to explain things clearly, the language of the

Trinity can still become quite confusing, especially when debated by theologians. Theological debates are often important, but they involve a great deal of technical language that can sound like gibberish. Because of that technical language, the British writer Dorothy Sayers worried that people in the church pews might conclude that “the Father is incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. It’s something put in by theologians to make it more difficult—it’s got nothing to do with daily life or ethics.”<sup>5</sup> Sayers sympathized with those who were confused by complicated theological debates, but she rightly insisted that Christians still need to understand the theological implications of the Trinity. Indeed, the language of the Trinity has very much to do with daily life and ethics.

Let’s start with ethics, the study of right ways of living. Virtually all Christian ethics are ultimately grounded in an understanding of God’s character.



The Bible says that we are to be perfect as God is perfect (see Matt. 5:48), and that means we are to model our way of living after God's own existence. But what exactly does that mean? The Trinity gives us an answer.

The Trinity tells us that part of the perfection of Christian living is mutual, self-giving love. Just as the members of the Trinity are bound together in love for one another, so we are called to love those around us in the same unreserved and uncalculating way. Especially within the church, where we share life in the Spirit, we are called to mutuality of love. We are to love and serve others, and, just as importantly, we are to let others love and serve us when we need their help. We may not do this very well, but it is the ideal. As Christians, we strive to be a community in much the same way that God as Trinity is a divine community of persons. Far from being unrelated to life, the doctrine of the Trinity is the defining core of Christian ethics.

Another tremendously important implication of

the Trinity has to do with epistemology.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that focuses on how we know what we know. Most of us do not spend much time thinking about how we know what we know, but theologians do. Especially when it comes to knowledge of God, theologians want to know where good ideas come from.

What the Trinity contributes to Christian epistemology is a reminder to be holistic. Because the Creator of the world, the Redeemer of the world, and the Sustainer of the world are all one and the same God, what we learn about God from creation (if we understand it properly) ought to correspond to what has been revealed about God through the life and work of Jesus (if we understand Jesus properly), and that, in turn, ought to correspond to what we believe about God from the experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives (if we understand that experience properly).

How have your beliefs about God been
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shaped by your understanding of creation, your understanding of Jesus, and your understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in your life? On which do you rely most heavily? On which do you rely the least?

In other words, the development of a Christian understanding of the world, a Christian epistemology, involves a triangulation process much like that used in navigation. Global positioning devices use three satellites to tell us where we are. It is the same in matters of faith. God's trinitarian relationship to the world as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer provides three necessary points of reference.

Paying attention to these three aspects of God's relationship to the world allows us to navigate our way through the world intelligently as Christians. If we listen only to the voice of the Spirit in our lives, we may develop a truncated view of Christian faith and a partially distorted view of

God. If we depend only on the revelation of God in nature, the same thing can happen. And even if we look only at Jesus as the basis of our faith and ignore the rest of creation and the work of the Spirit, we run the risk of having a limited and mistaken view of God, ourselves, and the world. It is only by holistically examining God's relationship to the world, by knowing God in trinitarian perspective, that we protect ourselves from developing a lopsided or unbalanced view of God.

Many complex issues need to be considered when discussing God and creation, and as a result, we may not fully agree on all the details. But two things are clear: God is love, and God's love for the world is expansive and embracing. The more we understand the depth of God's love, the more we ourselves will be able to love the world and everyone in it.

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### Human Nature

People are a very special part of creation. The author of Psalm 8 says that human beings are made just “a little lower than God” (v. 5). Genesis 1:26-27 says that we are made in the image and likeness of God. While God loves the whole world and everything in it, we—all of us who have ever been born—occupy a special place in God’s heart.

Our special status as bearers of God’s image brings special responsibilities. In particular, we are called to use our gifts and talents in the service of God, in helping others, and in caring for the natural world. We are here to play a positive role in the created order, but we have not always performed very well. Instead of serving God, we often serve ourselves, and instead of looking out

for the best interests of the world and the people in the world, we often look out for our own benefit and forget about everyone else. Therefore, questions naturally arise: What kind of people were we created to be? What went wrong? How are we supposed to treat one another? What is our true calling in life?

### The Image of God

One of the oldest Christian explanations of the image of God (or *imago Dei*) comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which links the image of God with freedom and rationality. Like God, human beings can think and decide and act. We are not mechanically determined machines, nor are we driven by instinct alone. We are people, and, as such, we possess the freedom and the responsibility to determine who we will be.

Individuals do not possess unfettered freedom. We are creatures, and we have limitations. Our biology and life histories have provided us with different sets of gifts and talents and with different burdens to bear. Some of us are healthy, while others must deal with debilitating diseases. Some of us are bold; others are relatively timid. Some of us have people who depend on us for their daily needs, while others have fewer direct responsibilities for others and can thus act more independently. Some people are born into wealth with apparently endless life options; others are raised in poverty and struggle just to scrape by. The range of our freedom is deeply shaped by many factors beyond our control: by the nations into which we are born; by the actions of our friends, neighbors, and enemies; by political structures that empower or oppress us; by the level of education available to us; by our genetic makeup.

At times, our lives are made easier by these factors, but sometimes our lives are made more

difficult. Regardless of who or what has influenced us, however, we are ultimately responsible for what we do with our lives. The choices we make decide who we become. Even if our choices are never absolutely free, they are still our choices, and no one else can make them for us.

What factors beyond your control have accentuated your freedom? What factors have narrowed the life options that are open to you? Is a person with a wider range of choices more likely to make wrong decisions?

The Bible describes the fundamental character choice each of us faces as a decision between “the way of life” and “the way of death.” This choice is starkly framed in the book of Deuteronomy when God says, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so

that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him” (30:19-20).

The options of life or death are both open to us, and God asks us to choose life. God wants us to choose life. In fact, God is continually calling us, inviting us, and luring us to choose life, but God does not make that choice for us. God may intervene, nudging us one way or encouraging us in a different direction, but God does not dictate. God never takes over the strings of our lives and makes us dance like puppets to a tune we do not want to hear. Why? Because, from the start, God made us for freedom. God wants us freely to choose the good and creatively to embody that good in the way we live. Most of all, God made us free so that we can freely choose to love the God who gave us life.

Can you identify some points in your life when you were choosing between the way of life and the way of death? Were

these dramatic moments of decision where the ramifications seemed clear, or were they subtle and understated, seeming almost inconsequential at the time? Do choices always require conscious reflection, or do our habits also reflect choices we have made?

## **Freedom, Failure, Dignity, and Doubt**

Choosing the way of life is not necessarily easy. As a result of our own decisions and the decisions of those who have lived before us, the natural terrain of the world is now tilted against our ability to choose the good. It is hard to live in ways that are consistently holy and good. And it is frustrating that we often fail, even when we are trying to do what is right. The apostle Paul

confessed that sometimes he could not make sense of his own actions, since “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). All of us have experienced similar failures of character. Freedom of choice can result in sorrow and regret.

Yet freedom is to be cherished, nonetheless, and the freedom of others, especially those who cannot defend their own rights, needs to be protected. People are still people even if they have lost, or have never had, the ability to make decisions for themselves. Everyone bears the image of God and deserves respect because of that fact. The Bible speaks frequently about the need for those in positions of power to defend the rights of the oppressed and to preserve the dignity of the poor. Appropriate treatment of those on the margins of society is central to our faith: Christians strive to help those who need assistance and to treat all people with the respect due to equals.

Human freedom is a gift from God, so it can

never be utterly destroyed. Even in the most trying circumstances—whether someone is deathly ill, a refugee, imprisoned, or abused—people maintain a spark of power to fashion a response. Still, in all too many instances, human freedom has been crushed to the point of being nearly extinguished. Every act of torture is thus not merely a crime against humanity but also an insult against God because it seeks to destroy part of God’s image. Every incident of genocide is an evil directed against both God and humankind. The fact that people who participate in such acts sometimes say they believe in God—sometimes even call themselves Christian—is difficult to comprehend.

Coercion regarding matters of religious faith can be just as disturbing as political coercion. Faith can never be imposed on someone else: It is the voluntary response of an individual to God. Even the slightest hint of spiritual coercion should set off alarms. Attempts to threaten, cajole, pressure, or trick people regarding matters

Next Page Faith can result in merely external compliance rather than internal conviction. As a result, freedom to doubt must necessarily be respected as a part of the freedom to believe.

How has the misuse of freedom caused sorrow or regret in your life? Where is human freedom most threatened today? Is Western-style freedom—the freedom to do whatever one pleases—the same thing as the freedom that is a part of being created in God’s image? Have you ever seen religious faith imposed on people or doubt disallowed?

## Love, Justice, and Common Humanity

A person who freely believes in God wants to

live in a way that pleases God, and Jesus clearly summarized what God desires. First, we ought to love God with our entire being, and, second, we ought to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40). For Jesus, these two commandments were inseparable.

When Jesus voiced this great law of love—the Jesus creed—he was not being particularly original. The Jewish rabbi Hillel had said much the same thing before Jesus began to preach.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Jesus was not intending to provide the world with an utterly new insight. Instead, he was underscoring something that we already know deep within us: We are connected to one another; our actions affect one another for good or ill; we are not isolated individuals.

Writing in the eighteenth century, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, appealed to this same law of love, explaining it in the more modern economic language of comforts, needs, and emergencies. He said:

We want everyone to love us, respect us, and treat us fairly, mercifully, and truthfully. It is reasonable for us to expect them to do all the good for us they can without harming themselves. According to this rule . . . their surpluses should be directed to our comfort, and their comforts to our needs, and their needs to our desperate emergencies. . . . Let us live by the same rule. Let us do to all people as we want them to do to us. . . . Let your surpluses give way to your neighbor's comfort. (Who would then have any surplus remaining?) Let your comforts give way to your neighbor's needs, and your needs to their desperate emergencies."<sup>2</sup>

Rather than being extraneous to human nature, this rule of love and compassion is deeply rooted in our souls. It is part of how we were made, and following it leads us into a fuller way of being

human, more intense fellowship with God, and richer fellowship with one another.

We are relational creatures, and we need one another. In fact, this is so much the case that some theologians speak of relationality as the key characteristic that makes us human. They see relationality as part of the image of God. If we are free and reasonable persons, and everyone else is similarly free and reasonable, we are inseparably linked to one another through our choices. What we do affects others, and therefore we have to take others into account in our decision making.

Love and relationality define the deep reality in which we live, and Christians have traditionally affirmed that these creational values of love and relationality derive from the character of the Creator. Thus, the early twentieth-century Anglican theologian Evelyn Underhill could write in her book *The School of Charity*, "God is Love, or rather Charity; generous, out-flowing, self-giving love. . . . To enter the Divine order then, achieve the full life for which we are made, means



entering an existence that only has meaning as the channel and expression of an infinite, self-spending love. This is not piety. It is not altruism. It is the clue to our human situation.”<sup>3</sup>

The poet John Donne said much the same thing when he memorably penned the words “no man is an island . . . [but] each a part of the main.”<sup>4</sup> Each of us is born into and raised within the context of family, community, and nation. As we grow older and mature, we join still other groups and communities, and we live within those expanding networks of relationship. We are not isolated individuals but persons in community who can enrich or impoverish the lives of those around us by our actions. The American educator Ernest Boyer summarized this vision of life by saying that “to be truly human, one must serve.”<sup>5</sup> He believed service to others was both the highest expression of our freedom and the deepest acknowledgment of our human interconnectedness. When we voluntarily serve

others, we are simultaneously doing what is best for us and what is best for those around us.

Historically, Christians have believed that we become whole persons through healthy relationships with God and others. Because of that, Christians have always felt a need to nurture families, churches, local communities, and the larger civil society—all the different contexts in which we learn how to live with one another—so that these varied social locations become and remain places where healthy relationships are possible and where human dignity is protected.

What qualifies as service? Does it have to be unpaid volunteer work? Or can we serve through paid jobs and routine activities?
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Human relationships are nurtured through expressions of both charity and justice. While love as charity stresses individual efforts on behalf of others, the ideal of justice focuses on the social

and the communal. Justice is not limited to helping others in their need but also involves changing social structures so that those needs themselves might be lessened or even eliminated.

The Catholic ethicist Thomas Massaro contrasts the social orientation of justice with the personal character of charity: “Where charity tends to involve individuals or small groups of people acting to meet the immediate needs of others, work for justice involves a more communal and even global awareness of problems and their potential long-term solutions. Where the notion of charity calls to mind voluntary giving out of one’s surplus, the notion of justice suggests there is an absolute obligation to share the benefits of God’s creation.” Massaro goes on to say that “we need not choose between justice and charity. Rather, we can seek the best way to combine heroic acts of love with a clearheaded view of the importance of justice that must be regularized and routinized in fair institutions that respond to

the needs and dignity of all.”<sup>6</sup>

Groups like Amnesty International and the International Justice Mission raise awareness of global injustice, and missionary agencies, charities, and newspapers inform us of the needs of our local and international neighbors. How do you decide where to get involved?

To be truly Christian and to be genuinely human coalesce. We all need to be loved. We all need, at one point or another, to help someone else or be helped in return. We all want to be treated fairly and respectfully. Thus, we should not be surprised to discover that what Christians see as good, proper, and laudable is often the same as what most other people see as good, proper, and laudable. Writing to the Galatians, Paul acknowledged as much, noting that no law forbids the character traits Christians value most,

such as love, compassion, and kindness (5:22-23). While these virtues are distinctively Christian, Paul indicates that they are not *uniquely* Christian. Other people share those values, and Christians, accordingly, celebrate them whenever they are exemplified in anyone's life.

## **Sin and Sorrow**

While love and justice define the ideals of human behavior, we all know that love and justice are often in short supply. As human beings, we frequently fail one another. Many of these failures stem from simple stupidity, immaturity, and mistakes of judgment. We do not mean to harm anyone, but we sometimes harm others anyway through our obliviousness and thoughtless behavior. At times, however, another element prompts our failings, and that element is sin.

Sin is anything that willfully diminishes the life that we and the rest of creation are meant to enjoy. Sin is living against the grain of God's universe. Sin can take many forms, expressing itself both in action and in the choice not to act when action is called for. In some people, sin springs from unwarranted pride; in others, it is a matter of pathological self-deprecation. In some cases, sin is aggressive and bold; in others, it is timid and self-effacing. In some instances, sin is premeditated; in others, it is almost totally spontaneous. Sometimes sin is crass and rude, and sometimes it is thoroughly cultured and polite.

Whatever particular form it takes, sin always involves a choice to prefer ourselves over others, over nature, and over God. It is rooted in the desire to follow our own way regardless of the consequences. Quite obviously, this means sin always works against genuine love and justice, but, less obviously, sin also works against the best interests of the sinner. In the book of Jeremiah,

God accuses the people of Israel of having “forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13). That is exactly what sin is like: It draws us away from the true source of our being and ultimately gives us nothing in return.

Sin is self-defeating. We need others, and we need God, and sin cuts us off from both. But we lapse into sin anyway because it has such powerful short-term appeal. The temptation to sin is always, in some sense, a lie. It beguiles us away from the truth of God and the truth of who we are. But unfortunately, people believe that lie again and again. People who are not Christians fall for it, and so do Christians.

When we sin, we are accountable for what we have done, especially for how our sin affects others. Catherine of Sienna, who lived in the fourteenth century and is considered one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church, said, “There is no sin that does not touch others,

whether secretly by refusing them what is due, or openly by giving birth to the vices.”<sup>7</sup> Our sinful actions harm us, but they also deeply wound others. Sin causes pain. Sin promotes anger, bitterness, and strife. Sin can crush people by taking away their will to live or their means of survival. Sin sows distrust and destroys relationships. Sin undermines life.

The reality of sin is why repentance, restitution, and forgiveness are also necessary aspects of the human condition whether we are Christians or not. When we sin, we need humbly and honestly to acknowledge what we have done and to ask for forgiveness from those we have sinned against. If something has been stolen, it should be returned. If we have lied about something, we should tell the truth. If we have slandered someone, we should help restore that person’s reputation.

But sometimes the consequences of our sinful actions are not reversible. It is not always possible to undo the damage we have done, and that is

part of the tragedy of human life. Regret and remorse cannot necessarily reverse the consequences of our wrongful actions and attitudes. We have all been wounded by these kinds of irreversible sins, and those who have been wounded the most need our special support and care.

Do you know someone who lives with regret over past sin? Do you know someone who lives with bitterness over a wrong done to them? Does forgiveness happen at a particular moment, or is it a process?

Forgiveness is part of the human condition. Sometimes it is easy to forgive, especially when people are truly sorry for what they have done. But at other times, forgiveness seems almost impossible, especially when the pain is great or when people refuse to acknowledge how much they have hurt us. Yet forgiveness is ultimately

necessary in order to move beyond bitterness and to preserve our own humanity. The only alternative is to live with a shrunken spirit and a diminished sense of what it means to be human. As Alan Paton, the South African activist and author, has written, “There is a hard law. ... When an injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive.”<sup>8</sup>

All of this—love, justice, freedom, service, sin, repentance, and forgiveness—is part of what it means to be human. It is part of how God has made us. Being a Christian does not lift us above the human condition. Rather, it calls us to participate in life in a new way—in the way of Jesus, following the way of life. Should we ever forget our own humanity and think of ourselves as separate from or better than the rest of the world, we can easily become ungracious in the way we treat others. Christian teaching, however, calls us back to reality. We are all created in God’s image. We all need to be loved, and we need to love