

Theological Statements

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1. The nature and activity of God.

God is the “I AM WHO I AM”,¹ the eternally living one, the source of life, the creator of the universe. There is only one God, and God is one; such is the historical faith of the people of ancient Israel² and the prerequisite belief for the two most important commandments as taught by Jesus of Nazareth.³ God exists in an eternal, intimate triune fellowship consisting of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; these are three distinct persons yet form one distinct being. Scriptural references to the doctrine of the Trinity are not totally explicit,⁴ yet the historical Christian conclusion based on scripture, reason, tradition, and experience is that God is both three and one. The influence of personal experience is significant in the discussion of the Trinity, because God is experienced as a transcendent being, as taking human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and as a continuing indwelling presence in the lives of those who believe.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is described as “slow to anger, abounding in love.”⁵ God’s love manifests itself through forgiveness of sin, aid in times of distress, compassion, and guidance. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the love of God is that “we should be called children of God.”⁶ Yet God is not merely the source and definition of love; God also requires obedience and faithfulness from the people of God. God does not tolerate sin in any of its forms and strictly judges those who do not repent of their sins, and yet God strongly desires for people to confess their sins and return to God in faith.⁷

¹ Exodus 3:14. All biblical references come from the NIV unless otherwise indicated.

² Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

³ Mark 12:28-34.

⁴ See, for example, Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and his teachings about the coming Counselor whom the Father would soon send (John 14-16).

⁵ See, for example, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, and Nahum 1:3.

⁶ 1 John 3:1. This entire letter (especially its fourth chapter) is a strong biblical treatise on the love of God.

⁷ See Ezekiel 18.

This strong desire leads naturally to a discussion of the activity of God. Throughout all human history, God's primary activity is one of mission, in which God works to draw people into relationship with himself. This mission is reflected even in the oldest stories of faith, such as that of Adam and Eve being sought out by God after their first sin⁸ and that of Noah and his family being saved from the cataclysmic flood because of Noah's righteousness.⁹ God chose and formed the people of Israel from the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; these people were the constant object of God's mission during centuries of their obedience and disobedience. This activity of God is perfectly and completely revealed in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who as fully God and fully man, lived and died and rose from the dead in order to restore relationships between God and all creation, including human beings. The work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the followers of Jesus confirms the mission of God; the Spirit continues to convict people of sin, to assure people of forgiveness and salvation, and to empower people to live holy lives. Therefore, the nature of God is intimately connected to the activity of God in that both depend on the doctrine of the Trinity.

2. The nature and role of Jesus Christ.

Jesus of Nazareth lived an historically verifiable life nearly two thousand years ago in the land now known as the nation of Israel. However, this historical life is explained, expanded, and made meaningful through a much broader biblical understanding of this person. The scriptures proclaim that Jesus is the "Word" of God who "was God," who "was with God in the beginning," and who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us."¹⁰ The Word of God, being coeternal with God the Father, "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all

⁸ See Genesis 3.

⁹ See Genesis 6-9.

¹⁰ John 1:1-14.

creation, [and] by him all things were created”; “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”¹¹ Hence, as Christian reflection has concluded, Jesus is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.

Jesus is the Son of God, born of the virgin Mary in “the fullness of time . . . so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”¹² Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament scriptures that prophesy the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior, the one who will bring restoration to the people of God. Thus, we do well to apply the Greek title “Christ” (equivalent to the Hebrew title “Messiah”) to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This understanding is thoroughly biblical, for the titles “Jesus Christ” and “Christ Jesus” appear over two hundred times in the New Testament.

Jesus Christ proclaimed the nearness of the Kingdom of God and the need for people to “repent and believe the good news.”¹³ Throughout his earthly and sinless life, Jesus Christ taught, performed miracles, and ministered to the needs of those around him, particularly the poor, the outcast, and the helpless. He explained the Kingdom of God to the crowds and his chosen disciples through parables in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecy.¹⁴ His teachings and his criticisms of the current Jewish worship practices led those in power to seek his elimination. Betrayed by one of his own disciples, Jesus was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death by crucifixion. This death was, in fact, essential to the role of Jesus Christ; as the perfect, flawless sacrifice, Jesus provided the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. No longer

¹¹ Colossians 1:15-20.

¹² Galatians 4:4-5 (NASB).

¹³ Mark 1:15.

¹⁴ See Matthew 13:10-17.

would animal sacrifices for individual sinners be required, as in Jewish practice; instead, belief in Jesus Christ is sufficient, for “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”¹⁵

This act of redemption was followed by the miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, through which he conquered the power of sin and death.¹⁶ He told his disciples beforehand that this resurrection would occur;¹⁷ afterward, he appeared to his disciples on multiple occasions in order to convince them of his resurrection.¹⁸ Paul records that the resurrected Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people.¹⁹ Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven in the presence of his disciples.²⁰ There he remains to this day, seated at the right hand of God the Father,²¹ until the time of his return to this world at the end of the age.²² As Prophet, Priest, and King, Jesus Christ proclaims the good news of the Kingdom of God, enters into the Most Holy Place to offer himself as the ultimate sacrifice for the salvation of God’s people, and reigns forever as the Lord of all creation.

3. The experience of Holy Spirit Baptism and work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is the very Spirit of God, co-eternal with God the Father and God the Son, present at the moment of creation,²³ continually active in the world for the purposes of God. Jesus promised that the Spirit, the *paraclete*, would be sent by

¹⁵ Romans 10:1-13.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:51-58.

¹⁷ See, among other passages, Mark 8:31-33, Mark 9:30-32, and Mark 10:32-34.

¹⁸ See Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 21, and John 20-21.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:6.

²⁰ Acts 1:1-11.

²¹ Hebrews 1:3.

²² See Acts 1:10-11, John 21:20-24, and Statement #14 below.

²³ See Genesis 1:1-2.

the Father to his followers.²⁴ This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit came upon the gathered believers in the upper room.²⁵

The work of the Holy Spirit is to continue the mission of God on earth. The Spirit has been active in the lives of God's people since the days of the Old Testament. On several occasions, the Old Testament records that a judge, king, or other leader was filled with the Spirit of God to accomplish a certain task within the will of God. This same Spirit also is connected to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ,²⁶ and the Spirit continues to be active in the life of the Church and in the lives of individual believers. This work specifically includes inspiration for discipleship, comfort in distress, guidance and direction, conviction of sin,²⁷ assurance of salvation,²⁸ and sanctification toward Christlikeness.²⁹ Sharing in the Holy Spirit is one of the most powerful blessings available to those who would follow Jesus Christ.³⁰

The concept of baptism by the Holy Spirit is complicated in that it is understood quite differently by various Christian groups and theologians. Holy Spirit baptism cannot be separated from the person and work of Jesus Christ, for John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire."³¹ Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus pointed to the coming day of Pentecost as the time when this baptism would begin taking place.³² Therefore, the baptism of the Holy Spirit must be connected to the Christ-centered divine activities of salvation and sanctification. Indeed, the book of Acts notes individuals and groups

²⁴ See John 14:16, John 14:26, John 15:26, and John 16:7.

²⁵ See Acts 2.

²⁶ See John 20:22.

²⁷ See John 16:7-11.

²⁸ See 1 John 3:24 and 1 John 4:13.

²⁹ See Romans 15:16, 2 Thessalonians 2:13, and 1 Peter 1:2.

³⁰ See Hebrews 6:4-6.

³¹ Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, and John 1:33.

³² Acts 1:4-5.

who received the Holy Spirit both before³³ and after³⁴ the moment of water baptism. This spiritual baptism is frequently characterized as a gift, and Paul clearly states one of the purposes for this gift: to provide unity within the Church.³⁵ Often in the time of the book of Acts, the gift of the Holy Spirit was accompanied by the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, as on the day of Pentecost. In most cases, the tongue was an actual human language, previously unknown to its speaker, which was used to convey the message of Jesus Christ to a new people group. As Paul wrote, “tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers.”³⁶ However, nowhere does scripture indicate that one is required to speak in tongues in order to prove the validity of one’s salvation.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit, in a more general sense, is a crucial experiential component of the process of justification and sanctification. I have experienced this phenomenon over a long span of time as the Lord has filled me with the Spirit so that I might be conformed more closely to the image of Christ in my thoughts and actions. Often, this infilling has taken the form of strong inward feelings and emotions of conviction, joy, and certainty, especially as I have realized the truth of Jesus Christ to a greater and greater extent and as I have committed and recommitted my life to the Lord. I view the entire span of my life as a disciple to be filled with evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life. (I have never spoken in tongues in the charismatic sense, nor do I wish to do so.)

³³ See, for example, Acts 10:44-48.

³⁴ See, for example, Acts 8:14-17.

³⁵ See 1 Corinthians 12, especially verses 12-13.

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:22. See the entirety of chapters 12-14 for a full Pauline discussion on tongues and spiritual gifts.

4. The ordinances of Baptism, Communion, Feet Washing.

Based on the teachings and instructions of Jesus Christ, the Church has developed certain ritual practices which are physical acts that are spiritual in nature. A broad majority of Christian groups agree on the two ordinances of baptism and Communion.³⁷ The Church of God (Anderson), in agreement with a smaller but historically continuous set of Christian groups, has adopted the ordinance of feet washing, as well. All three of these ordinances are biblical in nature, are commanded by Jesus Christ, and are part of my personal religious background and practice.

Water baptism is an ancient practice common to many cultures, including Jews before the time of Jesus. John the Baptist is famously known to have baptized many people for the purposes of repentance and forgiveness before Jesus began his earthly ministry.³⁸ Jesus himself was baptized by his cousin John; this was not for repentance, because Jesus had never sinned against God. Instead, the baptism of Jesus served as the beginning point of his ministry, the moment at which he proclaimed his full commitment to the purposes of God. The disciples of Jesus baptized many of his other followers while he taught, preached, and worked miracles.³⁹ After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything [he had] commanded [them].”⁴⁰ After the day of Pentecost, the early church leaders continued the practice of water baptism for repentance and forgiveness, but they made one crucial addition: they baptized converts in the name of Jesus himself.⁴¹ Baptism

³⁷ Communion is, of course, known by different names in different Christian circles. The Eucharist and the Lord’s Supper are among equivalent names for this ordinance.

³⁸ See, for example, Mark 1:1-11.

³⁹ See John 4:1-2.

⁴⁰ Matthew 28:18-20.

⁴¹ See, for example, Acts 2:37-39, Acts 8:14-17, and Acts 10:44-48.

continues to be practiced by Christians today as an outward, physical sign of an inward, spiritual reality – namely, that one has committed one’s life to God, has repented of one’s sins, and has received the Spirit of Christ.⁴² Baptism, “not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God,” is a crucial part of the salvation process because of “the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁴³ Water baptism also represents the spiritual death and resurrection of the individual, who lives a new life through identification with the physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴ Therefore, it is most appropriate for baptism to be administered to those who believe in Jesus Christ. I myself was baptized publicly at the age of sixteen, many years after I committed my life to following the Lord.

The Lord’s Supper is an important act of worship for the community of faith. Its roots lie in the ancient Passover feast, inaugurated on the day that God freed the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.⁴⁵ The betrayal and death of Jesus Christ occurred in conjunction with the annual Jewish Passover celebration.⁴⁶ The three synoptic gospels each record the event of the first Lord’s Supper. At a particular moment in the Passover meal, Jesus “took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘This is my body [given for you; do this in remembrance of me].’”⁴⁷ “Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”⁴⁸ Paul remembers Jesus saying, “Do this, whenever you drink it, in

⁴² This is the classical understanding of believer’s baptism; it is symbolic and significant but not salvific. Some Christians do believe that baptism is salvific, but there a danger lies in pointing to human works as a means of salvation. Still other Christians hold to an understanding of baptism which allows for infants to be baptized as signs of the unmerited grace of God in their lives. I value this grace-oriented approach to baptism, but my personal convictions lead me to practice and teach believer’s baptism as explained here.

⁴³ 1 Peter 3:21.

⁴⁴ See Romans 6:1-7.

⁴⁵ See Exodus 11-13.

⁴⁶ See Mathew 26:1-2.

⁴⁷ Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22. The portion in brackets is unique to Luke 22:19.

⁴⁸ Matthew 26:27-28.

remembrance of me.”⁴⁹ Rehearsing this meal as an act of worship and remembrance has been part of the experience of the Church from its earliest days.⁵⁰ In the Lord’s Supper, we have an opportunity to share a meal together at the table the Lord has prepared for us. We do not ingest the physical body and blood of Jesus, but we do consume physical reminders of the Spirit of Christ that lives in his disciples. Furthermore, “whenever [we] eat this bread and drink this cup, [we] proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes,”⁵¹ and thus this meal should be shared publicly and corporately as a means of witnessing to the faith. This entire discussion presumes that participants in the Lord’s Supper are actually believers in Jesus Christ and have appropriately examined themselves on a spiritual level; such should be the case, because this holy meal must not be taken lightly.⁵² Given its roots in the yearly Passover festival, the Lord’s Supper should be practiced by Christians regularly, at least once a year if not more frequently.

Feet washing is yet another ancient practice appropriated and transformed by the Church. In biblical times, washing guests’ feet was an important act of hospitality, because traveling by foot on dirt roads with many animals nearby was a messy business. The act of washing feet after a journey is recorded as early as the book of Genesis.⁵³ It is often associated with sharing in a meal, staying overnight, and being refreshed for the remainder of the journey. Only the gospel according to John records the event in which Jesus washed the feet of each of his disciples.⁵⁴ Simon Peter protested, probably due to the low social position of the one who washes another’s feet. But Jesus said to him, “unless I wash you, you have no part in me,” and “a person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean.”⁵⁵ Jesus then said to the entire

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-34.

⁵⁰ See Acts 2:42-46.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 11:26.

⁵² See Paul’s warnings in 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.

⁵³ See Genesis 18:1-5, Genesis 19:1-2, Genesis 24:32, and Genesis 43:24-25.

⁵⁴ See John 13.

⁵⁵ John 13:8-10.

group, “now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”⁵⁶ This commandment has been obeyed by some (but not all) Christian groups from the beginning of the Christian movement. The purpose of washing feet is no longer merely hygienic. Instead, as Jesus instructed, it is to practice and reinforce our mutual submission to each other; by washing each other’s feet, we humble ourselves and express our desire to serve each other. Also, in accordance with the ancient practice, feet washing is to provide refreshment and revitalization for the journey of discipleship; as a brother or sister in Christ washes one’s feet, one’s spiritual feet are washed by the Lord himself. On a theological level, the practice of washing feet is important because it reenacts the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ: he rose from the table, came down to the floor level to serve, and then resumed his position at the table.⁵⁷ While there is no scriptural or cultural recommendation for the frequency of this spiritual discipline, I believe it is healthy for a congregation to practice feet washing once a year.

5. Human nature and destiny.

Human beings are created in the image of God.⁵⁸ This image includes the capacity for relationship, self-awareness, use of conscience, creativity, and a responsibility for stewardship of the rest of God’s creation. The triune God, as the source of and genius behind all creation, formed humankind, male and female, in God’s own image. God declared that the creation of humanity, which is the climax of God’s entire creative activity, was “very good.”⁵⁹ Human beings, however, were created by God with the ability to choose whether or not to obey God, to love God, to respect each other, to be good stewards of creation, and so forth. As recorded in the

⁵⁶ John 13:14.

⁵⁷ Compare this to the great Christ hymn in Philippians 2:1-11. I am greatly indebted to the late Dr. Gilbert W. Stafford for the memorable ways in which he helped me realize this insight.

⁵⁸ See Genesis 1:26-27.

⁵⁹ Genesis 1:31.

story of the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden,⁶⁰ human nature includes the desire to be like God, to live by one's own rules and desires, and to disobey the commands of the Lord.

This is the "sinful nature" to which Paul refers so eloquently in his letter to the Romans.⁶¹ Paul explains that "when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore the fruit of death."⁶² All people are born with this freedom to choose sin, which is disobedience to and disrespect of God. The ancient Israelites were well aware of the negative implications of sin against God; they knew that sin had the ability to separate them from God, and therefore it must be taken seriously.⁶³ From their earliest days, they practiced a system of animal sacrifice in order that their sins might be forgiven.⁶⁴ Left to our own devices, human beings are bound to sin against God and to ensure our separation from God.

The destiny of a human being is much broader than the short span of his or her earthly life. In Old Testament times, this destiny was understood through the continuation of one's family line; not much is contained there about the concept of life beyond the grave.⁶⁵ However, the concept of "eternal life" is mentioned over forty times in the New Testament by Jesus, disciples, religious leaders, and everyday people; a common theme among the people of that time seems to have been the quest for the key to achieving eternal life. Jesus himself suggested that human existence is not terminated by death; however, he also taught that one's attitude toward sin and standing before God are determinative in terms of the quality of one's existence after

⁶⁰ See Genesis 3.

⁶¹ See Romans 6-8.

⁶² Romans 7:5.

⁶³ See Isaiah 59:1-2.

⁶⁴ See Statement #6 below.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, 2 Kings 25:1-7. While not necessarily explicit, this passage suggests that the worst thing the Babylonians could do to King Zedekiah was to eliminate his family line before his eyes, gouge out his eyes to make the memory permanent, and carry him off into exile. In a sense, Zedekiah lost his "eternal life" in that moment.

death.⁶⁶ Jesus and his followers were very clear: without forgiveness and reconciliation with God, one's destiny is characterized by "eternal fire" and is held in stark contrast to "eternal life." This begs the question of how one might receive such forgiveness and reconciliation, and to that question we now turn.

6. Salvation.

Salvation is a gift of God bestowed on individuals for the purposes of forgiving sin and restoring relationships between God and people. This concept has its roots in the practice of a person being saved from imminent danger by someone else, as illustrated in the song of Moses, who praised God for saving the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians through the miracle at the Red Sea.⁶⁷ The prototypical illustration of God's ability to provide salvation was the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, in which each Israelite family participated on the day of their release from slavery in Egypt. After that event, a ritualistic system of animal sacrifices arose so the people of God could express their worship of the LORD and might be assured of their forgiveness in God's eyes. The book of Psalms, the hymnal of ancient Israel, frequently records the cries of the people of Israel for the LORD's salvation. These cries became more fervent and pointed when the people were invaded, captured, and deported by foreign powers as punishment for their sins. Eventually, the prophets, especially Isaiah, spoke of a coming Savior who would bring salvation to Israel, either in spiritual or military terms.⁶⁸

This salvation was brought about by God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled numerous Old Testament prophecies of the coming Savior, and he greatly

⁶⁶ See Matthew 18:1-11.

⁶⁷ See Exodus 15:1-19.

⁶⁸ The military expectations of even the earliest disciples are revealed in their question to Jesus just before his ascension into heaven (Acts 1:6). However, Jesus consistently taught against the belief that the Kingdom of God and the Messiah would arrive in military form.

surpassed the expectations of the people of Israel in doing so. He came to proclaim a Kingdom “not of this world”⁶⁹ and to “take away sins . . . through the sacrifice of [his] body . . . once for all.”⁷⁰ This was necessary because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”⁷¹ By rising from the grave, Jesus proved that this final enemy has been defeated: “death has been swallowed up in victory.”⁷² Moreover, the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ is available not only to Jews, the people first chosen by God, but also to non-Jews (“Gentiles”); as Paul proclaimed to King Agrippa, the prophets foretold “that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”⁷³ Therefore, salvation now is freely available to all people, does not require animal sacrifices, and is only dependent on one’s repentance from sin and belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior.⁷⁴

Salvation, then, is intensely personal; it is the individual who is saved, not the nation or the people group. Salvation is heavily experiential in nature; one receives this gift by the grace of God after coming to believe in Jesus Christ and confessing one’s sins to the Lord. The conviction of sin and assurance of salvation are brought about by the Holy Spirit in one’s life. The work of salvation results in several changes in one’s life, and this work takes place through the phases known as justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification occurs at the very moment of salvation; it is the event in which God applies the death of Jesus Christ to the penalty of one’s sins, thereafter enabling the individual to stand without guilt before the Lord. This often coincides with a feeling of being emotionally or spiritually overjoyed. Sanctification is the process of being made holy or “set apart” for God’s purposes. It is not the process of

⁶⁹ John 18:36-37.

⁷⁰ Hebrews 10:1-14.

⁷¹ Hebrews 9:22.

⁷² 1 Corinthians 15:54. The entire chapter is a wonderful treatise on the resurrection of Christ.

⁷³ Acts 26:1-23.

⁷⁴ See Acts 10:43 .

achieving sinless perfection; instead, it is the time in which the individual is conformed more and more closely into the image of Christ.⁷⁵ The New Testament refers to sanctification both as an event that can be completed⁷⁶ and as a process that may extend beyond the moment in which one is justified.⁷⁷ Sanctification has to do with the entirety of one's existence – spirit, soul, and body – being oriented toward fulfilling the commands and desires of God.⁷⁸ Thus, sanctification influences the individual's ethical and moral decision making capabilities as a basis for obeying the greatest commandments: to love God and neighbor wholeheartedly.⁷⁹ The final stage of the salvation process is glorification, which refers to the work that Jesus Christ will accomplish in his believers at the end of the age, on the day of his return,⁸⁰ on the Day of Resurrection. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead and was glorified,⁸¹ so will his followers on that final day of judgment.⁸²

I personally experienced the joy of salvation at approximately the age of eight years old during a church camp worship service. The journey of sanctification is one in which I have been making progress, with the Lord's help, ever since. I eagerly look forward to the return of Jesus Christ so that I might be glorified and thereafter perfectly glorify him throughout eternity.

7. Holiness.

Holiness is intimately connected to the process of sanctification.⁸³ Both terms indicate that their object is “set apart” for a specific purpose. In the Old Testament, holiness is first and

⁷⁵ See Romans 8:28-30 and 1 Peter 1:13-16.

⁷⁶ See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 6:11.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7.

⁷⁸ See 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

⁷⁹ See Matthew 22:34-40.

⁸⁰ See Statement #14 below.

⁸¹ See 1 Peter 1:21.

⁸² See 2 Thessalonians 1:6-12.

⁸³ See Statement #6 above.

foremost ascribed to God; the ancient Israelites understood holiness to be one of God's defining characteristics.⁸⁴ Throughout history, God has called his people to "be holy, because [he is] holy."⁸⁵ Therefore, the fact that God is holy leads the people of God to pursue holiness in response. Paul wrote that holiness is the goal of "slavery to righteousness," and its end "result is eternal life."⁸⁶ In his letters to the church at Corinth, he wrote further that the source of holiness is Jesus Christ himself.⁸⁷ The epistle writers agree that personal holiness involves doing away with "everything that contaminates body and spirit."⁸⁸

As with sanctification, holiness does not require sinless perfection; instead, it requires growth toward Christlikeness, which has sinlessness as its ultimate goal. Holiness is the state of being wholeheartedly devoted to loving God and to loving one's neighbors, as Jesus Christ commanded. It is the process by which one "work[s] out [one's] salvation with fear and trembling," which is the natural conclusion of Christian experience and theological reflection on the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁸⁹ Holiness is closely tied to how one handles one's interpersonal relationships; living at peace with others,⁹⁰ showing mutual respect, praying for secular leaders,⁹¹ and conducting oneself respectfully in the world⁹² are all explicitly connected in the New Testament to the pursuit of holiness in Christ. Holiness is not optional for the disciple of Jesus Christ; instead, the scriptures caution us that "without holiness no one will see the Lord."⁹³ At

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Exodus 15:11-13.

⁸⁵ See Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2, and 20:26 for the first biblical statements of this type. This was well remembered by the early church: see 1 Peter 1:15-16.

⁸⁶ Romans 6:15-23.

⁸⁷ See 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 2:12.

⁸⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:1. See also Ephesians 4:22-27 and Hebrews 12:1-17.

⁸⁹ Philippians 2:1-16.

⁹⁰ See Hebrews 12:14.

⁹¹ See 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

⁹² See 2 Corinthians 1:12.

⁹³ Hebrews 12:14.

the same time, holiness will be the natural desire of one who has received a new identity through salvation in Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

In the history of the Church of God (Anderson) and in the broader holiness movement of the nineteenth century, personal holiness grew to be associated very strongly with social mores and moral codes. Keeping oneself unstained by the world was made manifest by avoiding movie theaters, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, neckties, and other such worldly vices. Many of these prohibitions were founded in the dominant culture of the day; over the span of the past several decades, that culture has transformed significantly. For instance, for most Christians, wearing a necktie or watching a movie in a theater is not understood, in and of itself, to be contrary to the life of holiness. Consequently, those who would follow Jesus and would work toward biblical holiness must constantly reexamine and reinterpret the prevalent attitudes and actions of the surrounding culture. The call to holiness is not a call to first-century living; today, it is a call to twenty-first-century living built on biblical and Christ-centered principles.

8. The nature of the church and church membership.

The nature of the church is a topic of utmost importance for contemporary Christians because, on the one hand, we believe that we are a continuation of the centuries-old community of faith and because, on the other hand, contemporary Christians hold to widely varying beliefs about the nature and characteristics of that community of faith. However, the church can best be understood through its connections to our Lord Jesus Christ. The church is the community of those redeemed by Christ; the church must first and foremost understand itself to be owned by Christ through the power of his redeeming blood.⁹⁵ The church also fills the role of the chosen

⁹⁴ See Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-79.

⁹⁵ See Ephesians 5:25 and Acts 20:28.

people of God, a role played by the nation of Israel before the coming of Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches us that the church is the body of Christ, who is the head of the church; this metaphor describes the organic and life-giving relationship that Jesus Christ has with his people.⁹⁶ The church exists in order to continue the work that Jesus began two thousand years ago; this work includes preaching the good news of the kingdom of God, proclaiming forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ, and giving itself sacrificially for the sake of the kingdom.⁹⁷ By doing so, the church is conformed to the likeness of Christ.⁹⁸ The church's goals reflect its Christ-centered nature: to raise authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, to be victorious over the "world forces of this darkness,"⁹⁹ to see the restoration of relationships among people and between people and God, and, as the "bride of Christ,"¹⁰⁰ to prepare itself for the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. Further, the church, while broadly understood as the fellowship of all the redeemed, is particularized in the local congregation; this local community is the vehicle for illustrating the unity of the church, which is one of its essential characteristics. The community of faith is made known by the love that its members show toward each other.¹⁰¹ This common love is a sign of divinely authored fellowship and unity which are reflections of the relationships within the Trinity.¹⁰² As a result, the church distinguishes itself from the world through holiness of purpose and action while proclaiming the message of Christ to those outside the community.

The church, then, is *one* on account of its unity in Christ. Its identity reveals that the church is *holy* because it has been redeemed by Christ and set apart for his purposes. Every goal of the church brings glory to the risen Savior by expanding his kingdom on earth, a kingdom

⁹⁶ See Ephesians 4:11-16 and Colossians 1:15-20.

⁹⁷ See Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:46-47, and John 15:18-27.

⁹⁸ See Romans 8:29.

⁹⁹ Ephesians 6:12.

¹⁰⁰ Revelation 19:7.

¹⁰¹ See John 13:34-35.

¹⁰² See John 17:20-23.

with *catholic* (universal) scope. In all of its functions, the church is in continuity with the ministry of the original *apostolic* movement; empowered by the Holy Spirit, followers of Christ do everything “as working for the Lord, not for men.”¹⁰³ Consequently, we may agree with the creed of the Council of Nicaea, which proclaimed that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in nature.

Membership in the church, like all of its attributes, is tied to Jesus Christ. Specifically, one’s membership depends on the saving work of Jesus Christ in the individual. The church does not belong to the people who comprise its body; instead, the church belongs to Christ. Therefore, membership in the church does not depend on adherence to a specific subset of Christian beliefs or on involvement in one specific denomination or organization over against other such groups. As often quoted in Church of God (Anderson) circles, “salvation makes you a member.” At the same time, the imagery of the church as the body of Christ implies that one who is separated from the church is indeed separated from its head. Thus, the church is comprised of all true believers in Christ who are in fellowship with the rest of his body. Moreover, involvement and commitment to a local church fellowship is crucial for every disciple of Jesus Christ.

9. The mission of the church.

The mission of the church is closely tied to its nature¹⁰⁴ and cannot be separated from the mission of God. Indeed, the church exists in order to continue the mission which God initiated from the beginning of human history: to draw people into closer and deeper relationship with God through God’s gracious forgiveness and reconciliation. This participation in the divine plan

¹⁰³ Colossians 3:23.

¹⁰⁴ See Statement #8 above.

includes evangelism, public worship, and ministry to people in need. Once again, the primary motivation for all of these activities is the desire to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. The church has the obligation both to bring people into fellowship with the body and to educate, nurture, and train its members through careful study and exposition of the Bible so that evangelism, worship, and ministry might continue to take place. The end result of such activities is the restoration of relationships between God and humans, which is the essence of the Great Commission. In this sense, the church's mission is indeed apostolic, for when the church accomplishes these tasks, it is aligned with the mission and ministry of the original apostles.

As an application of this continuity with the apostles, the church is called to give of itself in ways that reflect Christ's self-giving nature. The church should model Paul's imitation of Jesus through sharing in the sufferings of the Savior;¹⁰⁵ appropriate suffering occurs not through passive indifference but rather through active translation of the message of Jesus in word and deed so that people of all cultures and lifestyles may learn of him. Such translation may engender external opposition, but it is precisely then that the church knows it is truly carrying out Christ's commands as the original apostles did.¹⁰⁶ This opposition can and should take the form of a church life which, when necessary, runs counter to the prevailing worldly culture out of which the church is called.

Of course, the church cannot follow in the footsteps of the original apostles or of Jesus Christ himself by its own strength, for the church as a collection of human beings is, simply put, human. Rather, every function of the church is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ revealed at Pentecost which dwells in the hearts of all true believers.¹⁰⁷ This empowerment by the Holy Spirit causes the church to be able to step forward in faith on its

¹⁰⁵ See Colossians 1:24-29 and Philippians 3:7-11.

¹⁰⁶ See John 15:18-27.

¹⁰⁷ See Ephesians 5:15-21.

mission. As the church extends the good news of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by and revealed in Jesus Christ, the church simultaneously embodies that good news by becoming the presence of the kingdom of God on earth. Those who have been redeemed by Christ are made members of the kingdom¹⁰⁸ by the work of the Trinitarian God: under the redemption and headship of Jesus Christ, the church exists to carry forth in bodily form the eternal mission of God the Father through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

10. The basis for Christian unity.

The basis for Christian unity is to be found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Since membership in the church is entirely dependent on the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ, then all who are in the church automatically experience unity on the basis of their common position as the redeemed. As the earthly representation of the kingdom of God, the church draws its unity from the unity within the Godhead itself. The High Priestly prayer of Jesus¹⁰⁹ provides a dramatic and eloquent foundation for the unity of believers. Jesus prayed specifically for his contemporaries and for those who would follow him: “I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”¹¹⁰ This extended quotation reveals that Christian unity has its basis in the unity of God and that Christian unity exists for a purpose: to extend the mission of God in the world.

¹⁰⁸ See Colossians 1:13.

¹⁰⁹ See John 17.

¹¹⁰ John 17:20-23.

With this preparation in mind, we may understand clearly Paul's articulate treatise on the nature of the church and its spiritual gifts.¹¹¹ Paul states that the Holy Spirit gives each believer the power to claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and to participate in the divine mission. Any group of believers will naturally express quite different gifts for this mission. However, since these gifts "are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines,"¹¹² then the diversity within the body of believers ideally functions as a beautiful illustration of unity – a unity rooted in God himself. After all, "the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ."¹¹³ Again, this unity is not artificial; it is intentionally created by God, who "has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be."¹¹⁴ Christian unity, then, has its source in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Christian unity is best exemplified within the local congregation, for it is that environment which the epistle writer addresses when he urges believers to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of us all, who is over all and through all and in all."¹¹⁵ However, Christian unity cannot be restricted to merely one congregation, to one socio-economic or racial group, or even to one denomination or movement. In a world which is becoming increasingly global, it is crucial for Christians of all backgrounds and cultures to appreciate and demonstrate visibly the unity which exists in Jesus Christ. With a world that is quickly becoming disillusioned with organized religion in general and Christianity in particular, we should study and learn from these

¹¹¹ See 1 Corinthians 12-14.

¹¹² 1 Corinthians 12:11.

¹¹³ 1 Corinthians 12:12.

¹¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:18.

¹¹⁵ Ephesians 4:3-6.

passages of scripture in order that the world may know that Jesus has been sent from God in order to reveal the everlasting and forgiving love of God.¹¹⁶

11. Tithing and stewardship.

When God created the heavens and the earth, God placed human beings in a position of authority over the world, its resources, and its creatures.¹¹⁷ Consequently, the people of God have had a biblical mandate, since the very beginning, to care for the planet which God has given to them. As Jesus taught on a number of occasions,¹¹⁸ it truly matters how one handles that with which one has been entrusted. Moreover, those who have been entrusted with possessions must live with a constant awareness that the true owner may return at any moment to check on his possessions. God requires human beings to be faithful stewards of his creation, and those who would follow Jesus Christ must honor the Lord with their use of material resources. In today's world, this truth has practical implications in terms of how individuals use limited and/or polluting resources such as plastics and fossil fuels. Also, disciples of Jesus Christ have a responsibility to help protect valuable natural resources, including endangered species, natural forestation, oceans, and the atmosphere. The concept of Christian stewardship forms a theological framework around which discussions of tithes and offerings revolve.

Since the earliest days of the Old Testament, the people of God have regularly practiced thanksgiving through the presentation of material goods to the Lord. In fact, the first offering in scripture comes from the ancient story of Cain and Abel, a story which shows the seriousness with which the people of God should make offerings to the Lord.¹¹⁹ From the days of Moses

¹¹⁶ See John 17:23.

¹¹⁷ See Genesis 1 and Psalm 8.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Matthew 24:45-51, Matthew 25:14-30, and Luke 16:1-13.

¹¹⁹ See Genesis 4.

onward, the Israelites followed an elaborate system of offerings for various purposes, occasions, and holidays. Each of these offerings involved some physical resource, such as animals, grain, wine, and so forth. One purpose for this system of offerings was to provide for the physical needs of the Levites, the priestly tribe which owned no land and hence could not grow their own food. This system persisted even until the time of Jesus, who was presented to the Lord by Mary and Joseph along with their offering of two small birds.¹²⁰ Indeed, late in his life, Jesus cleansed the temple of those who were selling such physical resources for traveling worshipers.¹²¹ Offerings to the Lord and provision for the people of God seem to be predicated upon proper attitudes. The Psalmist says that “at his tabernacle I will sacrifice with shouts of joy”;¹²² again, “let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.”¹²³ The apostle Paul urged the church at Corinth to give freely to the church at Jerusalem, because “God loves a cheerful giver.”¹²⁴

One of the most basic and lasting ways in which these offerings have been presented to the Lord is through the tithe. This ancient standard is, literally, a tenth of one’s resources, and the Old Testament law and prophets frequently refer to the tithe as the required base offering for God’s people. This practice has its roots in the visit of the mystical king Melchizedek to Abram, who, upon being blessed by this king, “gave him a tenth of everything.”¹²⁵ The prophet Malachi challenged the people of Israel not to “rob God” but to “bring the whole tithe into the storehouse”; God promised that he would “pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”¹²⁶ The basic principle behind the tithe is, once again, stewardship; since

¹²⁰ See Luke 2:22-24.

¹²¹ See Luke 19:45-48 and its parallels.

¹²² Psalm 27:6.

¹²³ Psalm 107:22.

¹²⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:7.

¹²⁵ Genesis 14:18-20. See also Hebrews 7 for further reflection on this ancient tithe.

¹²⁶ Malachi 3:6-12.

God owns all creation by virtue of having created it, the practice of giving regularly to the Lord reminds his people that they are merely stewards and that they depend on God's provisions on a daily basis.

In money-based cultures, the principle of the tithe still has effect. Jesus said to those who would challenge him, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."¹²⁷ Just as people regularly pay their taxes, so much more so should they give regularly to God with joy and thanksgiving. The tithe is not an empty requirement; it is a basic standard with which one begins to express one's joy to the Lord, and it is the means by which one shows one's dependence on the Lord for all things. In my personal life, I have been committed to giving monetarily to the Lord on a regular basis, with the tithe as the beginning of the amount given to my local congregation. This practice has indeed helped me remember that God will provide for all my needs and that I play an important role as a steward of what God has entrusted to me.

12. The authority of scripture.

The Bible is the written word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit for the purposes of revealing the truth of Jesus Christ and for encouraging, correcting, and motivating those who would follow him. The Bible as we have it today, including both Old and New Testaments, has been in existence for nearly sixteen hundred years; components of it, however, have been understood to be holy scripture for much longer. For instance, the authors of the New Testament epistles refer to Old Testament prophecies and commands, and these are named "the Scripture" or "the Scriptures."¹²⁸ Jesus himself studied and taught these writings of faith throughout his

¹²⁷ Luke 20:19-26.

¹²⁸ See, for instance, Romans 1:2, 4:3, 9:17, 10:11, 11:2, and 15:4; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Galatians 3:8, 3:16, 3:22, and 4:30; 1 Timothy 5:18; James 2:8, 2:23, and 4:5-6; 1 Peter 2:6; and so forth.

earthly ministry.¹²⁹ Indeed, many of these refer to Old Testament prophecies for the explicit purpose of identifying Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The New Testament even contains evidence that more writings were being considered authoritative and scriptural at the time of its composition.¹³⁰

The scriptures have the divinely appointed advantage of maintaining this message of redemption in Jesus Christ across generations, through various translations, and in all cultures and periods of history. As the author of 2 Timothy wrote, we should “continue in what [we] have learned and have become convinced of, because [we] know those from whom [we] learned it, and how from infancy [we] have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”¹³¹ Scripture has this authority on account of its inspiration by God; “above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”¹³²

Similarly, the interpretation and teaching of scripture, then and now, does not originate with the interpreter and teacher. Instead, scripture has authority all of its own and must be allowed to speak with that authority into the issues, events, and problems of the present age. This is why the New Testament encourages us to “devote [ourselves] to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”¹³³ Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the

¹²⁹ See, for instance, Matthew 21:42, 22:29, and 26:54; Luke 4:16-21 and 24:25-35; John 5:39, 7:38, 13:18, 17:12, and 19:28.

¹³⁰ See 2 Peter 3:15-16, where the author references Paul’s difficult-to-understand letters. Compare also Daniel 9:2, which suggests that Daniel understood Jeremiah’s relatively young prophecy to have scriptural authority.

¹³¹ 2 Timothy 3:14-16.

¹³² 2 Peter 1:20-21.

¹³³ 1 Timothy 4:13.

Bible must be studied carefully and continually by each individual and congregation. As our primary vehicle of knowledge and revelation about the nature of God and the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Bible functions as the foundation on which all other ideas must rest. In the tradition of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, we may look to tradition, reason, and experience as means of discovering truth about the Lord, but each of these depends on and must be verified by the Bible, God's written word of revelation, which stands as the final authority and rule on all issues of faith.

13. The Kingdom of God.

The good news of the coming of the kingdom of God is the central message that Jesus came to proclaim.¹³⁴ Jesus instructed his disciples to go forward and preach the same message.¹³⁵ Throughout his ministry, he illustrated this kingdom with teachings, miracles, and many rich and beautiful parables.¹³⁶ Jesus spoke frequently about the kingdom in more straightforward terms, as well. He challenged his followers to accept the kingdom as a child would accept it;¹³⁷ he also suggested the journey toward the kingdom is not an easy one.¹³⁸ While he taught us to pray to God the Father that the kingdom might come,¹³⁹ he taught that the kingdom already exists within those who believe.¹⁴⁰ Jesus claimed boldly that the weak, the neglected, and the outcasts of society were "entering the kingdom of God before" the religious leaders of his day;¹⁴¹ indeed, he proclaimed that the kingdom is open to all people.¹⁴² Jesus saw

¹³⁴ See Matthew 3:2, 4:17, and 4:23; see also Mark 1:14-15. Matthew's term "kingdom of heaven" is understood throughout his text to be synonymous with "Kingdom of God."

¹³⁵ See Matthew 10:5ff.

¹³⁶ See Matthew 13 and Luke 19:11ff.

¹³⁷ See Mark 10:14-15 and Matthew 18:1-4.

¹³⁸ See Mark 9:47 and Luke 9:62.

¹³⁹ See Luke 11:2.

¹⁴⁰ See Luke 17:20-21.

¹⁴¹ See Matthew 21:23-46.

himself as continuing the momentum begun by John the Baptist;¹⁴³ he even told his disciples that some of them would “see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” before they died.¹⁴⁴ One follower was proclaimed to be very close to the kingdom because of his understanding of the truth of the most important of God’s commands: to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.¹⁴⁵ Contrary to the disciples’ expectations,¹⁴⁶ Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is “not of this world.”¹⁴⁷ Instead, the kingdom of God is the spiritual fulfillment of the political reality that God had established in the historical nation of Israel.¹⁴⁸

For centuries, the people of God placed great importance on the kingdom of Israel. Frequently, especially when times were good, scripture records that this kingdom belonged to God; during David’s reign, the people believed that God would sustain his reign forever.¹⁴⁹ Once it became clear that the temple was to be built by Solomon, then the Lord’s kingdom was understood to be made secure in this son of David.¹⁵⁰ The prophet Daniel, in the aftermath of Israel’s destruction, spoke about God’s “eternal kingdom,”¹⁵¹ one which, unlike all earthly kingdoms, “will never be destroyed.”¹⁵² Daniel’s fervent belief in this eternal, unconquerable kingdom eventually convinced both King Nebuchadnezzar and King Darius, foreign rulers over the people of Israel.¹⁵³ Daniel’s faith in the coming kingdom of God climaxed in his vision of “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds in heaven, . . . [whose] kingdom is one that will

¹⁴² See Luke 13:22-30.

¹⁴³ See Matthew 11:7-14.

¹⁴⁴ See Matthew 16:27-28.

¹⁴⁵ See Mark 12:28-34.

¹⁴⁶ See Acts 1:6.

¹⁴⁷ See John 18:36.

¹⁴⁸ See Mark 11:7-11, in which the people associate Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the return of King David’s kingdom.

¹⁴⁹ See 2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17:7-14, 29:10-12; 2 Chronicles 13:1-12, 17:1-6; Psalm 45:6, 103:19, and 145:11-13; and Obadiah 1:21.

¹⁵⁰ See 1 Chronicles 22:8-10 and 28:5-7.

¹⁵¹ See Daniel 4:3.

¹⁵² See Daniel 2:36-44.

¹⁵³ See Daniel 4:34 and 6:26.

never be destroyed.”¹⁵⁴ Jesus himself claimed the title “son of man” for himself,¹⁵⁵ thus placing him in connection with the scriptures as the one who would both usher in and rule over the unending kingdom of God.

The early church leaders, including Philip, Paul, and Barnabas, carried forth Jesus’s message of the kingdom of God.¹⁵⁶ Many of the New Testament epistles continue to reflect on and develop this message for the earliest believers and those who would follow them. The kingdom of God indeed belongs to God through Jesus Christ and is inherited by those who follow him.¹⁵⁷ This is an eternal kingdom,¹⁵⁸ one which “cannot be shaken.”¹⁵⁹ It is oriented not toward the powerful but toward those who are “poor in the eyes of the world.”¹⁶⁰ While the kingdom is made manifest by “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,”¹⁶¹ those who would enter into the kingdom must be willing to work toward that goal,¹⁶² even if such a pursuit leads to suffering in this life.¹⁶³ Disciples of Jesus Christ are expected to live holy lives according to morally pure standards as God “calls [them] into his kingdom and glory.”¹⁶⁴ In fact, it is in these holy lives, empowered by the Spirit of God,¹⁶⁵ that the kingdom of God is made visible, for the Lord “has made us to be a kingdom.”¹⁶⁶ The kingdom of God, therefore, has *already* arrived through the power and presence of the triune God. However, the kingdom is *not*

¹⁵⁴ See Daniel 7:13-14.

¹⁵⁵ Granted, this title is much more fully developed in the prophet Ezekiel.

¹⁵⁶ See Acts 8:12, 14:22, 19:8, 28:23, and 28:31.

¹⁵⁷ See Colossians 1:10-14.

¹⁵⁸ See Hebrews 1:8 and note how the author quotes and reapplies Old Testament faith in this new context.

¹⁵⁹ See Hebrews 12:28.

¹⁶⁰ See James 2:1-10.

¹⁶¹ See Romans 14:17-18.

¹⁶² See 2 Peter 1:10-11.

¹⁶³ See 2 Thessalonians 1:2-10 and Revelation 1:9.

¹⁶⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:12. See the list of moral codes in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Galatians 5:19-26, and Ephesians 5:17, and note how each is connected to the kingdom of God.

¹⁶⁵ See 1 Corinthians 4:20.

¹⁶⁶ See Revelation 1:5-6 and 5:9-10.

yet fully realized until the return of Jesus Christ on the day of judgment and resurrection,¹⁶⁷ at which time the people of God will proclaim loudly, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”¹⁶⁸

14. The Second Coming.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ spent some forty days with his disciples for the purposes of convincing them of his resurrected life and of teaching them more about the Kingdom of God.¹⁶⁹ On one of these occasions, Peter asked Jesus about “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and “Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.’”¹⁷⁰ Apparently this caused some confusion in the early church, because the author of John’s gospel concluded his work with a discussion of this statement as it related to the unnamed disciple. However, the author apparently was not concerned about whether or not Jesus would return. Just after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, “two men dressed in white” explained to the awe-stricken disciples that “this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”¹⁷¹

This promise wove itself into the theological reflection of the New Testament writers. For instance, Paul connected the return of Jesus with the end of time, the resurrection of the dead, and the final victory over death.¹⁷² Also, Paul referred to the church at Thessalonica as his “glory and joy” which will be made complete “in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he

¹⁶⁷ See 1 Corinthians 15:21-26 and Statement #14 below.

¹⁶⁸ Revelation 11:15.

¹⁶⁹ See Acts 1:3.

¹⁷⁰ John 21:20-24.

¹⁷¹ Acts 1:9-11.

¹⁷² See 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

comes.”¹⁷³ Again, Paul includes in his first letter to this church both a prayer for the holiness of the church “when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones”¹⁷⁴ and a statement of conviction that “the Lord himself will come down from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first.”¹⁷⁵ This return of Jesus is associated with “the end of the age;” the author of Matthew, for instance, occasionally refers to this climactic moment, often in the context of the coming or return of Jesus.¹⁷⁶ The New Testament writers were careful to explain that the timing of future events such as this is necessarily a mystery to humanity;¹⁷⁷ however, most writers expected that Jesus would return soon.¹⁷⁸

Based on the witness of scripture, Christians today may be assured that Jesus Christ will indeed return in majesty and power in order to execute the final judgment¹⁷⁹ and to bring about the completion and fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Speculation on the details of this second coming are not profitable. In recent years, much thought has been given to the timing of Jesus’s return and to the events surrounding that return. Many people have looked to the book of Revelation for evidence regarding these details, but a faithful historical-critical exegesis of this book and its many complicated images will reveal that many present-day expectations of the second coming are not justifiable by the word of God. For instance, I believe that belief in the millennial reign of Christ, based on a few verses of Revelation,¹⁸⁰ ignores the broader purpose of the book of Revelation, which was to encourage early congregations that were undergoing severe persecution. Therefore, in my understanding, the strongest Christian doctrine of the return of

¹⁷³ 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20.

¹⁷⁴ 1 Thessalonians 3:13.

¹⁷⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

¹⁷⁶ See Matthew 13:36-53, Matthew 24, and Matthew 28:18-20. The Matthew 24 passage is quite debatable in terms of its historical referent; Jesus’s lengthy monologue here most likely refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 rather than the ultimate end of human history.

¹⁷⁷ See Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32, and Acts 1:6-8.

¹⁷⁸ See, in addition to the above, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Revelation 3:11, 22:7, 22:12, and 22:20.

¹⁷⁹ See Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁸⁰ See Revelation 20:1-10.

Christ is amillennial in its approach. Jesus Christ will return in power and glory, but events commonly associated with his return¹⁸¹ need not be objects of our hope. Neither should we assume that two thousand years of Christian history are summarized in allegorical form in the book of Revelation, nor that the present state of affairs in the world must necessarily point to the imminent return of Jesus Christ.¹⁸² Instead, Christians today, as in all periods of human history, should live with a constant expectation that Jesus will return soon. Such an expectation should encourage us to live with hope and deep joy despite the physical and spiritual trials we face in this life. With the early church and with the apostle John, we cry out, “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!”¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ These include, but certainly are not limited to, a premillennial rapture of believers, an unleashing of Satan on the earth for seven years, and so forth.

¹⁸² This, of course, was a strong theological belief of a significant portion of the Church of God Reformation Movement (among other groups) in the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁸³ Revelation 22:20.