

CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

THEOLOGICAL NOTES

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KEY IDEA 1: CHRISTIANS BELIEVE GOD IS ONE GOD: FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart . . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God. (Luther, Large Catechism, Kolb, Wengert: 386)

CHRISTIANS CONFESS GOD AS FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Human beings look for 'god'. It may be expressed in terms of looking for 'identity, security and meaning' (Kolb 8–9). St Augustine (354–430) expressed the human longing for god in the well-known prayer: 'O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you' (Confessions I i). This search for God has led people to many different concepts about God.

On the basis of Scripture (eg Matt 28:18–20; 2 Cor 13:13), Christians confess God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is three in one, and one in three. While we may speak about 'one God', Christians do not emphasise the unity of God at the expense of the trinitarian nature of God. Nor do we lose the unity of God through an overemphasis on the 'three persons'.

This confession of God is a truth of faith, not a truth of reason. It is a way to speak about the mutual communion that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In representing this mystery of the trinity, the Nicene Creed confesses that:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty . . . and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages . . . and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. (Kolb, Wengert 22-23)

In exploring the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the trinity, C S Lewis (147) speaks about the 'dynamic activity of love [which] has been going on in God forever and has created everything else'. He continues (148), 'that in Christianity God is not a static thing – not even a person – but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost . . . a kind of dance.'

GOD IS REVEALED AS FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

'Natural revelation'

'Natural revelation' looks for God through traces of himself which he has left in his creation. However, only by faith can these traces be seen as pointing to God. They are inadequate in themselves to provide any complete picture of God and may instead lead people to create God in their own image.

There are at least five ways in which we might glimpse God: in nature, in history, through conscience, by reason, through emotions. Some of these have been used in attempts to develop 'proofs' of God (eg nature – 'cosmological', 'teleological'; reason – 'ontological'). However, these same avenues may lead people to see God as 'either a cruel tyrant or a pathetic fraud' (Silcock 10).

'Specific revelation'

Christians recognise that we can know God only because God finds us (Luke 15:3–7) and reveals himself to us in Scripture. Only through the special revelation that comes to us in Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Heb 1:1–2), through the proclamation of the gospel, do we know God as loving, merciful, kind and forgiving (cf **CC1**). Once we know God in faith, we can also see the world with eyes of faith and recognise the traces of God in the world (Ps 19:1).

God reveals himself as 'person'

Christians believe that God reveals himself as 'person' (Exod 3:14) with whom we have a relationship (cf **CL1**). God is not simply an impersonal divine force. Various attributes are ascribed to God which reflect this personal nature (eg loving, caring, forgiving, etc). God is also seen as both immanent and transcendent.

God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Christians believe that God reveals himself as three persons, but as one God. This deep mystery of the Christian faith cannot be explained: it can only be believed because of God's revelation of himself and the way in which God works in the world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As indicated earlier, this doctrine of the trinity can be seen as thoroughly scriptural (eg Matt 28:18–20; 2 Cor 13:13), although it is not fully developed in written form as a doctrine of the church until the fourth century. There are many ways of trying to illustrate the relationship within the trinity (eg triangle, three states of water, the apple, the cloverleaf, etc) but nothing can really 'explain' the mystery of the trinity. There are also ways of speaking about the trinity to emphasise different aspects of the work of God (eg God over us [Father], among us [Son], in us [Holy Spirit]; creator, saviour and helper, creator, reconciler and life giver/sustainer; creator/preserver, redeemer and sanctifier, etc).

The Christian belief in the trinitarian nature of God is summarised in the Nicene, Apostles' and Athanasian creeds. Luther's Large and Small Catechisms provide an important Lutheran commentary on these creeds.

[It is important to try to help students to think and to speak about God in a trinitarian way. It is also important that this way of speaking about God is used in worship and particularly in prayer. Very often prayers are addressed to 'God', or 'Father', or 'Jesus' rather than to 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. Because of the Lutheran emphasis on the centrality of the gospel and the work of Jesus Christ, relating to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be under-emphasised.]

God the Father

'Father' is a name for God (Eph 3:14–15). It is not a metaphor or an image to describe God. We should not attempt to understand the fatherhood of God on the basis of earthly fathers, but earthly fathers should be modelled on the fatherhood of God.

Although the use of 'Father' as a name can be seen as problematic, to change the name of God used by Christ, and which Christ gave us to use in the Lord's Prayer ('Our Father'), is to change the God we are addressing, because in biblical thinking to change a name is to change the person. The Bible uses both male and female images to describe God, but the triune God revealed in the Bible is genderless – neither male nor female. However, the difficulty of gender specific pronouns (he/him/his) remains.

Although all persons of the trinity are involved in all of God's work (eg Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all involved in creation), work which is specifically related to the Father is that of creating and preserving the universe (see below).

God the Son

The earliest confession of Jesus Christ in the church is probably 'Jesus is Lord!' (1 Cor 12:3). However, God the Father used 'Son' for Jesus already at his baptism (eg Matt 3:17) and Jesus used the name for himself (eg John:19–23).

[**Note:** the person and work of Jesus Christ will be dealt with in **CB2**.]

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Because people often think of the Holy Spirit as 'spirit' or 'power' or 'life-giving force', the Holy Spirit is often referred to as 'it' rather than a person with his own identity in the triune God together with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit has also sometimes been referred to as 'the shy member of the trinity'. This is not because the work of the Holy Spirit is somehow less significant than that of the Father or the Son. The Holy Spirit is centrally involved in all of the mighty works of God. However, much of the work of the Spirit is to point people to Christ as their saviour and to continue the ministry of Christ in the world. In this way the Spirit points away from himself to Jesus and the Father. Jesus emphasised in his discussion with Nicodemus (John 3:8) that the work of the Spirit is essential for the Christian but that, like the effect of the wind, the work of the Spirit is seen by its impact and its results in the life of the Christian.

CREATION AND PRESERVATION OF THE UNIVERSE

All life and all existence begin with the ever-living creator. Creation is the result of the will of God and emphasises that we are completely dependent on God for our existence. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1). While creation is most often related to God the Father, it should be seen as involving all three persons of the trinity. All things were created through the Son (John 1:10) and the Holy Spirit is confessed as the life-giver.

However, creation is not simply God's action in the past, but God continues to create (cf **CL2**). Luther captured this continuing creation of God in his explanation to the first article of the creed: 'I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. . .' My life, therefore has meaning and purpose.

It is not hard to believe that some supreme power created all things. The beauty and order of the universe tell us that. But even the most advanced study of the universe cannot tell us **who** its creator is or **why** the universe has been created. We can know the creator only because he has made himself known to us in his word – especially through the Word

who became a human being, God's Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that the creator of the universe is not some impersonal force, but God, our wise and loving heavenly Father. What makes Christian teaching about creation different from any other is that we view the creation of the universe with the eyes of faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit working through the biblical witness reveals to us that Jesus is the focus also of the creation story (John 1:2, Col 1:15–17, Heb 1:2).

The Bible does not answer all questions about the origin of the universe. That is not its purpose. It is the legitimate domain of science to investigate questions of origin. The Bible is more concerned to lead us to know the creator and the relationship between the creator and his creation than it is to teach us to know everything about the creation.

The Bible tells us the following:

- **God created the universe out of nothing.** The universe is not eternal, matter is not eternal. God created the primeval material – the atoms and molecules (Heb 11:3).
- **God created all things 'by his word'.** They came into existence because God wanted them to and because God used his power (Ps 33:6). The Bible does not offer scientific explanations of the 'how' of creation; it simply tells us that God is the creator. The universe is God's (Ps 24:1,2).
- **God created in an orderly way.** Genesis 1 brings out the 'rhythm' and orderliness of God's creative work as God creates order out of chaos. In each stage of creation, God speaks, another stage of creation is completed, and God sees that his creation is good. This creation is not the result of some struggle with an opposing force as in the creation stories of other ancient religions (eg Babylonian creation stories). (There is no dualism, nor any separation between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'.)
- **God's creation was good.** There was perfect harmony in God's creation. Everything was just the way the creator wanted it to be. God is not responsible for the disharmony, disorder and evil we observe and experience now (cf **CB3**).
- **God looks after the universe he created.** God set up the laws of nature (day and night, the seasons, the laws of physics, etc) by which the universe continues to exist in an orderly way. God is not limited by these laws, however. God continues to work within his creation, and he may use his power to bring about 'supernatural', miraculous events.
- **God still preserves his creation:**
 - a) by providing for the needs of all creatures, especially human beings (Ps 145:15,16; Matt 6:25–34). This includes things like medicine and technology;
 - b) by protecting his creatures, especially human beings (Matt 10:29,30). [The Bible also speaks of the angels as serving God by protecting people (Ps 91:11,12)];
 - c) by making humans caretakers of God's creation (Gen 1:28, 2:15). We are to value and preserve the environment God allows us to enjoy (cf **CL3**);
 - d) by working through people as participants in God's ongoing creation (cf **CL2**).

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit participates in all of the mighty works of God

As one of the three persons of the triune God, the Holy Spirit is active wherever God is speaking or acting. The Nicene Creed speaks of the Holy Spirit as 'the Lord and giver of life'. He is the life-giving breath of God (Gen 1:2; 2:7; Ps 33:6; 104:27-30) through whom all things were created and continue to be preserved.

The Spirit was active among the Old Testament people of God, showing his divine power particularly through people like the judges and kings (eg Judges 3:10; 6:34; 1 Sam 10:6; 16:13) who spoke and acted by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit also worked through the prophets (Isa 61:1; Micah 3:8) who spoke the word of God to the people. The prophets also looked forward to the time when God would send the Holy Spirit to his people in a full and special way (Joel 2:28,29), anticipating the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12).

The work of the Holy Spirit is linked closely with the life and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). At his baptism by John the Baptist the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove and anointed him for his ministry in the power of the Spirit (Mark 1:9-11). The Spirit then 'immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness' (Mark 1:12-13) where he was tempted by the devil. The close tie between the work of Jesus and the work of the Spirit is most clearly developed in the parting words of Jesus to his disciples (John 14-16) where Jesus promises to send them the Holy Spirit [the 'Paraclete': the counsellor, helper, guide, comforter, advocate]. The Holy Spirit will teach them and remind them of all Jesus has said (John 14:26), will 'testify' on behalf of Jesus (John 15:26) and guide the disciples 'into all the truth' (John 16:13-15).

Following his resurrection, Jesus 'breathed' the Holy Spirit on his disciples (John 20:19-23) giving them his authority to forgive sins on his behalf (cf CB3). After his ascension, Jesus kept his promise on the day of Pentecost by pouring out the Holy Spirit on all people (Acts 2:16-21) in a clear demonstration of divine power (Acts 2:1-12). The sound of the mighty wind and the tongues like fire were signs of the Spirit's powerful presence and operation. The Spirit transformed Jesus'

disciples from doubting, fearful followers into people of strong faith who boldly witnessed to the truth about Jesus as the promised Messiah. Through the powerful, Spirit-filled preaching of the disciples, the Spirit changed the hearts and lives of thousands of people as they confessed their sins and were baptised in the name of Jesus whom they acknowledged as their only saviour (Acts 2:37-42).

The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in the life of the Christian

Martin Luther in his explanation of the Third Article in the Small Catechism says this about the work of the Holy Spirit [Kolb, Wengert 355-356]:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins – mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Luther here concentrates on the major work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ is so radical that the Bible speaks about it as a 'new birth' (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5,6). By nature every human being is spiritually dead towards God (John 3:5-6; Eph 2:1; 1 Cor 2:14). The Holy Spirit leads people to recognise their sinfulness and spiritual helplessness and to repent and believe in Christ. No-one can come to faith without the Spirit's powerful work (1 Cor 12:3) [cf CB3 additional material on 'grace'].

For many Christians this work of the Holy Spirit begins through the sacrament of baptism. The Holy Spirit works through the word of God [cf CC1] and the sacraments [cf CC3] which are therefore sometimes designated 'the means of grace' The Holy Spirit also brings each believer into the church as the body of Christ [cf CC2] in which the Spirit continues his work in their lives through the ministry of word and sacrament.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is also portrayed by St Paul as a 'down payment', 'first instalment' or 'deposit' because the Spirit is a guarantee of what is to come (2 Cor 1:21,22; 5:5; Eph 1:13,14). Since the Holy Spirit continues the work of Christ, he guarantees that the life believers now enjoy in Christ will be brought to a joyful completion when Christ returns.

The Holy Spirit makes Christians holy ['sanctification']

When the Spirit brings people to faith in Jesus Christ, he not only provides forgiveness for their sins, but also transforms their lives. He makes people holy, not only in their status before God ['justification'] but also in their living ['sanctification']. The Spirit produces 'fruit' in the life of the believer: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal 5:22,23). While in this life Christians are always sinners and saints at the same time (cf CB3), yet by the Spirit's power they grow in holiness (Eph 4:22-24; Rom 12:1,2) becoming more and more 'Christ-like' in their words and behaviour. This is not their own doing, but the Holy Spirit working within them, forming their life of discipleship (Gal 2:20) (cf CL2 and CW2).

The Holy Spirit also helps Christians to pray according to the will of God and intercedes for them when they are unsure how to pray or are unable to pray for themselves (Rom 8:26,27). It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that as children of God we dare to come to God with the cry 'Abba Father' (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) (cf CB3).

The gifts of the Spirit

As well as producing 'the fruit of the Spirit' in the life of Christians, the Holy Spirit also distributes 'the gifts of the Spirit' to them for the purpose of ministry. There are three main passages which speak about these gifts: Eph 4:11 [which list various roles or functions in the church] and Rom 12:6-8 and 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30 [which speak about various gifts for ministry in the congregation].

Misunderstanding about the gifts of the Spirit led to problems in the congregations already in the early church. St Paul had to deal with people trying to construct a hierarchy of gifts, valuing some more highly than others. Paul emphasised that all gifts are given by one and the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:11) for the edification and growth of the whole church (1 Cor 12:7) and not for the personal benefit of individuals. While the 'fruit of the Spirit' is present in all believers, no one person has all the gifts of the Spirit, but the Spirit 'allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses' (1 Cor 11:12).

Again in the church today there are those who emphasise the more 'spectacular' gifts such as speaking in tongues or working miracles. However, some of the other gifts, such as helping, administering, showing mercy, giving generously, leading, showing compassion, cheerfulness and hospitality may be even more important in building up the church by supporting and encouraging others.

The Holy Spirit continues to work in the church today through the gifts he gives to people for service. These may be other gifts than those mentioned in the New Testament. It is important for Christians to learn to recognise their own gifts and also the gifts of others so that working together the church is built up to the glory of its head, Jesus Christ.

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- This key idea is part of the strand called 'Christian Beliefs'. It therefore provides the opportunity to present clearly and consciously the Christian understanding of the triune God and how this confession of faith shapes the Christian worldview. However, this does not remove the necessity to 'own and ground' this belief in God, recognising that many students may not share in this confession of faith in God.
- How do we speak about 'god' to students who have no concept of 'god'?
- Are students looking for 'god', or are they more concerned with some general experience of 'spirituality'?
- Is the 'God of Abraham' worshipped by Jews, Christians and Moslems the same god?
- What do various symbols or artistic representations of God reveal about God?
- Explore the image presented by C S Lewis of the trinity as dynamic and moving, like three persons engaged in a complex dance, where each person contributes and is necessary for the dance to be performed.
- Are there any theological issues in opening our worship 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', or 'In the name of God our Mother, Lover and Friend'?
- How can we deal with the relationship between science and the Bible when considering the origins of the universe? (cf also **CW1**)
- How can we help students see themselves as part of God's 'continuing creation'?
- Is there a tendency in Lutheran schools to separate the 'sacred' and the 'secular'?
- If the Holy Spirit wants all people to come to faith in Jesus, why don't all people believe? (Consider Matt 22:1-14; 23:37-39; Acts 7:51.)

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KEY IDEA 2: THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST IS CENTRAL TO CHRISTIANITY

Then the high priest said to Jesus, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so.' (Matt 26:63–64)

Jesus said to his disciples, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' (Matt 16:15)

Thomas answered Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' (John 20:28–29)

The most crucial question in life for every person is the one addressed by Jesus to his disciples. Either Jesus Christ is who he claims to be, or he is a disillusioned fraud. Christians believe that how this question is answered determines not only how we live in this life, but where we spend eternity.

While this key idea considers the person and work of Jesus Christ in particular, what Christians believe about Jesus Christ permeates all areas of the Christian Studies curriculum and the life and work of the Lutheran school. While one outcome of this key idea will be that students hear the story of Jesus, there will also be the prayer that through the work of the Holy Spirit, students will meet and be met by Jesus Christ or that they will grow in their already existing relationship with him.

THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST — JESUS AS DIVINE AND HUMAN ('CHRISTOLOGY')

True God

Jesus is true God. This is what makes Jesus unique. He is more than a great teacher, wonderful model and inspiring spiritual leader. He is the Son of God 'from eternity'. That means, there has never been a time when Jesus did not exist as God's Son ('the Word', John 1:1–3). Jesus is 'God incarnate', that is 'God in the flesh' (John 1:14). If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus (John 14:9). He shows us the power, glory, wisdom of God, and especially the love of God (John 1:17,18).

It is God himself who is our Saviour. The Son of God 'humbled himself'; he did not always and fully use his divine qualities (power, glory etc). In order to save us, *'he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us'* (Phil 2:7). So great was his love for sinful human beings, that the Son of God experienced all the misery, pain and suffering of sinful human existence and even hell itself (Matt 27:46) in order to rescue them from sin and its consequences.

Jesus' resurrection is central to the Christian faith. It shows that he is truly God, that in raising Jesus from death God has accepted Jesus' perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that death can no longer hurt human beings as the punishment for sin.

A real human being

Jesus is truly human. The Son of God became a human being **for us**, to take our place — to live the perfect life we are supposed to live but can't, to take our sins on himself and pay the penalty we deserved. He died our death and went through the hell of being forsaken by God.

Jesus lived a truly human life. He was born as a truly human baby (but without sin). He developed physically and mentally (Luke 2:40). He went through normal human experiences. He got tired, he was hungry and thirsty, happy and sad, pleased and angry. The one difference was that his life was perfect; he obeyed his Father in absolutely every respect, even though he knew that this would mean sacrificing his innocent life to pay for the guilt of the whole human race.

Jesus' suffering and death were real. He felt what any of us would feel. In Gethsemane, for example, he was 'deeply distressed' and said: *'I'm so sad that I feel as if I'm dying'* (Mark 14:34). He felt the shame of the soldiers' mockery and the pain of their scourging, the weight of the cross, the agony of crucifixion and the torture of being forsaken by his Father.

Jesus' resurrection was real. The same human body that suffered, died and was buried became alive again. More than 500 eyewitnesses said they saw the risen Jesus. In the forty days after Jesus' resurrection his followers saw how Jesus' body was no longer restricted by the physical laws of time and space. Jesus' self-humbling for us is over. Now he is in an 'exalted' state; he always and fully uses his attributes (power, glory etc) as God.

Still today Jesus is God in human flesh. A human being — one of us — is forever at God's right hand, as the advocate who intercedes for us, as the Lord who rules all things for our benefit. We can follow him through suffering, death and resurrection to live forever with bodies that will be glorified like his (Phil 3:20,21; 1 John 3:1–3).

Difficulties with this teaching

Although the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, it took the early church until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 to settle controversies about the two natures of Jesus Christ. Various attempts were made to deal with the miracle of the incarnation (Jesus becoming a human being) which denied either the full divinity of Jesus Christ or his full humanity. For example, some people taught that Jesus only seemed to be human ('docetism'). Others taught that Jesus Christ was not really divine. One group of these, led by Arius, taught that Jesus was subordinate to God the Father: if not, then God has divided into two — the Father and the Son — and therefore God is no longer one. The extended section in the Nicene Creed (325) dealing with Jesus Christ, grew out of this dispute. These same heretical teachings emerge from time to time in current thinking about Jesus Christ. Only if Jesus Christ is truly God and truly a human being can he be the saviour of the world.

The teaching of the incarnation (Jesus as both fully divine and fully human) highlights a key emphasis of Lutheran theology, its paradoxical or dialectic nature. Lutheran theology seeks to hold in creative tension a number of apparently contradictory insights from revelation: law and gospel, saint and sinner, sacred and secular, left- and right-hand kingdoms, etc. As with the humanity and divinity of Christ, all of these aspects of theology must be clearly distinguished but never separated: they must always be retained in creative balance.

THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST ('SOTERIOLOGY')

The work of Jesus Christ is connected inseparably with his person. Only because Jesus is fully human and fully divine can he be the saviour of the world. There is a long tradition in Christian theology which sees the work of Jesus Christ under three 'offices': prophet, priest and king.

Prophet ('revealer')

The Old Testament prophets spoke on behalf of God. Jesus claimed this status for himself: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1:18). People who heard Jesus recognised that he spoke with a special authority (Matt 7:29; John 7:46). Jesus taught regarding our relationship with God and our relationship with one another — both the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' relationships.

When Jesus began his ministry, he announced that the kingdom of God was here. In his person the loving, saving rule of God had come to human beings. In parables about the kingdom he told people what it is like when God rules with his grace. Jesus' miracles were 'signs of the kingdom'. God's loving rule was in action when Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, forgave sinners and ate with outcasts.

Jesus' clearest and most profound revelation of the love of God came through who he was and what he did. Through Christ, God revealed his love for the world in his death on the cross to bring all people back into a right relationship with God (2 Cor 5:19–21; Rom 5:8). But this revelation of God in Christ is seen by human reason as 'foolishness' and 'weakness' (1 Cor 1:18–30). Only in Jesus Christ do we have hope — his revelation shows the impossibility of any attempts we may make to try to put ourselves right with God.

While he lived on earth in his humiliation (Phil 2:5–8), Jesus proclaimed God's word directly through his teaching and life: now in his exaltation (Phil 2:9–11), he continues this 'prophet office' first of all through the pastoral office (where the pastor functions as Christ's mouth) as well as through the witness of his people.

Priest ('substitute and victim')

Jesus Christ is the priest who offered himself as a sacrifice for his people (Heb 9:26), but who also remains forever the mediator between God and his people (1 Tim 2:5).

Jesus Christ has taken our place (our substitute) in the face of all that threatens and accuses us. He came to serve and give his life as a ransom (victim) for sinners (Mark 10:45). Jesus Christ is the 'suffering servant' (Isa 52:13 – 53:12), the one who humbled himself to death on the cross (Phil 2:8). Jesus has freed us from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10–14). He has paid the penalty for our sin and has turned away the wrath of God on account of our sin (1 John 2:2; Rom 3:25a). Jesus frees us from our sin and guilt through the forgiveness of our sin (2 Cor 5:21). This is the forgiveness we receive through the sacrament of holy communion.

Because Jesus is now 'at the right hand of the Father', he continues his priestly role as our advocate (1 John 2:1), who mediates for us, representing us to God, and God to us. Because he is both God and a human being, Jesus Christ is our high priest, continually interceding for us (Heb 7:25). Because he has suffered temptation, we can approach the throne of grace, trusting in God's mercy and help (Heb 4:14–16).

[Note: in speaking about the work of Jesus Christ, it is important not to play one person of the trinity against the other. Dr Jeff Silcock (83) expresses the concern this way: It is not as if Christ buys God off through his self-sacrifice. *It's not that God was formerly angry and has now become loving because of his Son's innocent death on the cross. God has never been anything but love.* And it was his love that drove him to send his Son to the cross, just as it was the Son who

out of love willingly obeyed his Father's will in the Spirit for our salvation. This is a profound mystery that we will never understand. Faith simply accepts it with gratitude and gives glory to the triune God.]

King ('victor' and 'ruler')

Jesus is the king who has won the victory for us over sin, death and Satan. Through his death on the cross, Jesus has finally defeated these enemies and has also broken the power of the law over us. This victory is clearly demonstrated for us in Christ's resurrection. In our baptism, we have been united with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3–11) so that we now share in his victory.

Jesus is also the king who is a servant. His throne was his cross and his crown was made of thorns. He rules in the church through his love and mercy, demonstrating his love in washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1–20). His commandment is that we love one another (John 13:34–35).

Jesus rules as king now at 'the right hand of the Father' although his kingdom is not visible (cf **CC2**). Christ's ascension is his 'enthronement' and enables him to be everywhere at all times and no longer confined in time and space. Jesus will also return as king at the end of time (Col 3:1–4) and judge the living and the dead (Matt 24:27–44; 25:31–46). He will then reign forever in glory with the saints.

Christ as example

Some people see the life of Christ simply as a model for human living. While the life of Christ can certainly be seen as a model which we can try to imitate (1 Pet 2:21–25), there are aspects of his life (eg the significance of his suffering and death for the sins of the world) which are unique to Jesus Christ. There is also a danger that we see our own efforts as contributing to our salvation. It is very easy to slip into legalism or moralism which puts the emphasis on our efforts rather than the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The 'joyous exchange'

Luther spoke of the work of Jesus Christ as the 'joyous exchange' of Christ's innocence for the sinner's guilt and sin. Kolb (154–155) summarises Luther's position as follows:

In his passion and death Christ absorbed into himself all the evil that clings to his people. Substituting himself for sinners, he gathered onto his own back all the sin and guilt that condemn them to death. He took the entire evil of each individual with him into his tomb and deposited it there. This tomb is the only place in God's creation into which the Father does not look. Having assumed our suffering and death upon his own person, Christ trades them for life itself.

FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

To believe in Jesus means more than just acknowledging that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. It means trusting Jesus as our only hope of being rescued from our guilty condition and from the punishment we deserve. More than that, it means living and dying with the confidence that because of Jesus, God is always for us and nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:31–39). Jesus Christ is both universal and unique. He is the only savior for all people, whether or not they have faith in him.

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- This key idea is part of the strand called 'Christian Beliefs'. It therefore provides the opportunity to present clearly and consciously the Christian understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and how this confession of faith shapes the whole life of the Christian and the world of the Lutheran school. However, this does not remove the necessity to 'own and ground' this belief in Jesus Christ, recognising that many students may not share in a relationship with Jesus.
- What presuppositions about Jesus Christ might students bring into the school context?
- In the Lutheran school context, do we 'explain' Jesus Christ, 'proclaim' Jesus Christ, 'confess' Jesus Christ?
- What understanding of Jesus Christ comes through the songs used in school worship?
- Where do we tend to see more emphasis placed — on the divinity of Christ or on his humanity? What does this do to our understanding of the person and work of Jesus?
- Is it important that Jesus is both God and a man now?
- Who died on the cross? God? A man?
- What concerns might there be with the popular slogan 'WWJD' — 'What would Jesus do?'

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KEY IDEA 3: A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW IS SHAPED BY THE BIBLICAL TEACHING OF SIN AND GRACE

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

(Rom 5:8)

Human beings are a special creation of God. Originally they were created without sin. However, sin has destroyed the original harmony of God's creation. All relationships have been affected by sin (cf **CL1**).

SIN AND EVIL

What is sin?

There are various words and expressions in the Bible to describe sin, for example, transgression, rebellion, revolt, iniquity, missing the mark. However, sin is also more profound than that: it is the total breakdown of the relationship between God and human beings. It is not simply wrong actions, thoughts, words or feelings; it is above all a condition, a disease that infects every human being (Rom 5:12; John 3:6).

The origin of sin

The Bible provides no explanation for the origin of evil. It simply confronts us with the reality of evil already in the Garden of Eden, where the snake becomes an instrument of evil and deception.

When God created human beings, he did not create robots or puppets. Adam and Eve had free will to choose to obey God or to disobey him. This also meant they could choose to sin. God put one restriction on Adam and Eve's life in the garden: they were not to eat the fruit of one tree (Gen 2:15–17). The devil tempted them to question why there should be any restrictions at all. Why shouldn't they be on the same level as God? The first sin set the pattern for every sin — human beings wanting to be like God (idolatry), doing what they want instead of what God has commanded.

The first (original) sin contaminated the whole human race; it corrupted human nature completely (Eph 2:1–3). Jesus indicates that evil comes from within a person, from the heart (Matt 15:10–20, cf Gen 6:5). The sinful nature we inherit from our parents is not just neutral towards God; it is actively opposed to God (Rom 8:7). We can never live up to the standard of goodness God expects: perfect love for God and for all people. As history and our own experience teach, any human being is capable of the greatest wickedness (Matt 7:17).

However, the depth of our sin cannot ever be fully understood simply through human reason alone. God's word tells us that we are all sinners, and it clearly teaches that because of our state of sin ('original sin'), we are all pronounced guilty by the law and deserve to die. We are all born in this state of sin which condemns us in the sight of God, not because of what we *do*, but because of what we *are*.

The effects of sin

Sin brought into the world guilt, disharmony, suffering and death — spiritual, physical and eternal death. It has resulted in broken relationships with God, ourselves, other people, and the whole of creation.

- Sin has broken our relationship with God (Gen 3:7–10), and there is nothing we can do to restore that relationship. In fact, by nature we now try to put ourselves into the place of God's and be like God (idolatry).
- Sin leads to internal turmoil within ourselves (Rom 7:19), as we deal with guilt, bad conscience, fear, insecurity, despair and other results of our broken relationship with God.
- Sin immediately led Adam and Eve to a broken relationship with each other: they were suddenly ashamed of their nakedness (Gen 3:7). This also led to a pattern of blame, disagreement, self-centredness, hatred, anger and violence with the murder of Abel by Cain (Gen 4:1–16). Sin continues to have its devastating consequences for all human relationships.
- Sin also has its profound effects on human relationships with all of creation. Nature now tends to work against human beings (Gen 3:17–19), and can unleash massive destruction on human beings. Human beings also abuse their mandate to take care of and preserve creation.

As God had warned, sin also brought death into the world. God in his mercy did not immediately destroy Adam and Eve. In fact, he clothed them in skins and blessed them with children. However, they would now one day return to the dust from which they had been created (Gen 3:19). As far as our natural relationship with God is concerned, we are dead in sin (Eph 2:1–3; Col 2:13) until God rescues us and gives us life through Jesus Christ.

By choosing to disobey God, human beings lost their free will in spiritual matters. While we are free to choose in the sphere of everyday things (what to buy, where to go, whom to marry, etc), we have no choice in spiritual matters. We are unable to choose God and turn freely to him. By nature, because of original sin, we rebel against God. Luther, in his explanation of the third article in the Small Catechism, puts it this way: 'I believe that by my own understanding or

strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel . . . We cannot choose God – it is God, in his mercy, who chooses us.

Because of who we *are* (original sin) this determines what we *do*. Our state of sin leads us to actual sins of thought, word and deed. Kolb (98–100) provides a helpful classification of actual sins (sins of commission and omission, habitual sins and occasional sins, individual sins and communal sins, etc) which may be useful for pastoral care. Although all sins show the breakdown of our relationship with God and in this sense all sins are ‘equal’ before God, some sins may be more dangerous spiritually for a particular individual than others. This is a pastoral issue rather than a theological one.

The ‘theodicy’ question: ‘How can evil exist if God is truly good and completely powerful?’

There is no completely logical answer to this question. Many answers have been attempted, and not all reflect what the Bible teaches. Kolb (80–85) provides a very good treatment of these various options.

The Bible does suggest some ways of looking at the problem, but it remains part of the mystery of the hidden God. Silcock writes (49), ‘God may *permit* evil but he is not the *cause* of evil. God opposes evil. He does not initiate it, but he can and does use evil to serve his good purposes (Gen 50:20).’ ‘God does not use suffering to punish us but he can use it to shape and discipline us (Heb 12:5–11) as well as to develop Christian character (Rom 5:3–4)’ (Silcock 50).

We can bring our complaints to God (cf Pss 44, 74). Jesus himself felt the agony of being abandoned by God. He has experienced suffering, and God shares in the suffering of all his creation. While the gospel doesn’t explain suffering, it does proclaim God’s ultimate triumph over evil, and God’s presence with us now in our suffering as God suffers with us. God suffers with those who suffer, weeps with those who weep, etc.

God’s response to sin

Because God is holy and just and loving, he cannot simply ignore human sin. Sin has its consequences. However, already in the Garden of Eden when sin came into the world, God’s ultimate response to sin was clear. His plan was to show his love and mercy to all of his creation, and his promise of a saviour (Gen 3:15) was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

God has two ways of dealing with the power of sin and the reality of evil in the world. One way is through keeping sin and evil in check through the law. This is the realm of justice. God works through the ‘political use’ of the law to ensure that his creation functions in the way it was created to function. For example, in commandments four to ten, God protects various human relationships (cf **CL1**). God operates through the government, through human reason and custom, using coercion, reward and punishment (the ‘left-hand kingdom’). In this way God tries to preserve his creation and have people live together in peace and justice. However, sin still has its devastating impact.

God’s second way of dealing with sin and evil was to send Jesus Christ so that the power of evil could be broken and sin could be forgiven. This is the realm of mercy (cf **CB2**). Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has provided the only way for human beings to once again be in the state of harmony and fellowship which God had intended, a state of harmony with God, themselves, other people and the whole of creation. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ has eternal life (John 3:16) as a present reality (John 3:36; 5:24) and as a future hope (1 John 3:1–3; 1 Pet 1:3–9). This eternal life is one of the gifts given to us in our baptism when we become children of God (Rom 6:3–11).

GRACE

The way in which God responds in mercy to sin is a gift of sheer grace. Forgiveness which is offered in Jesus Christ is given by God completely without conditions, freely, with no strings attached. God forgives sinners and accepts them as his children not because of anything which they can do but because of what Jesus has already done for them (cf CB2). St Paul is very clear when he says that ‘while we still were sinners’ (Rom 5:8) and regarded as ‘ungodly’ (Rom 4:5; 5:6), ‘Christ died for us’. We are saved by grace through faith because of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24).

Human thinking finds it difficult to accept the grace of God. Because humans tend to think in terms of reward and punishment they want to feel that somehow they can contribute to, or earn God’s forgiveness. However, God’s grace does not depend on any prior action or attitude on their part, nor does God look for ‘good qualities’ or the potential for change in their lives before he is ready to forgive. God gives his gift of grace without prior conditions.

But how can a person receive the gift of grace? This is also by means of a gift – the gift of faith. In his Small Catechism Martin Luther writes in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed (Kolb, Wengert, 355):

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith...

Some Christians say that they have been ‘saved by faith’. Speaking in this way can give the impression that their forgiveness is based on their faith as a ‘good work’ on their part. They see their faith as a precondition for receiving

the gift of forgiveness. It seems that they have by their own decision put their faith in Jesus Christ. However, faith and forgiveness are both the gift of grace given through the Holy Spirit (cf CB1 and CC3). Lutheran theology speaks very precisely: 'We are saved by grace through faith on account of Christ'.

The comfort in all of this for Christians is that their life with Christ is not dependent on the ebb and flow of their faith, but on the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Their God given faith allows them to hang on to the promises of God just as a drowning person clings onto a rope thrown to him from a boat. The hand can only trust in the rope and receive the rescue it offers.

God's gift of grace is also the means through which the Holy Spirit works in the life of the Christian developing the fruit of faith in their lives (Gal 5:22,23; Col 3:12-17). Through God's grace the Holy Spirit works to transform the life of the Christian making it conform more and more to the model of Jesus Christ (Rom 12:2) (cf CB1).

Saving faith, forgiveness in Christ and the fruit of faith through life in the Spirit – all of these are the result of God's gift of grace in the life of the Christian.

Jesus used the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) to try to give some insight into the mystery of unconditional grace. At the end of the day, all of the workers received the same payment irrespective of whether they had worked all day in the hot sun, had spent only half a day in the vineyard or worked merely one hour before receiving their payment. All received one denarius, the stipulated day's pay for a hired worker. God's gift of grace is also the same for all. It is not something which is earned, but is freely given by God to all, not on the basis of their good work, but out of the goodness of God. The response of Jesus to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:42,43) provides another insight into the gift of grace: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'.

SAINT AND SINNER

Even though by the grace of God Christians are made right with God through the forgiveness of sin (justification), Christians always also remain sinners. Before God Christians are both sinners under the law and 'saints' (forgiven sinners) under the gospel. Only after resurrection and the final judgement will sin be destroyed. Until then, Christians will always live in the tension of 'saint and sinner'. As we live in this tension, we recognise the reality of sin in our lives, but we also focus particularly on the fact that in Christ we are also already 'saints'.

The Holy Spirit is active in the lives of Christians. The Spirit helps Christians to live holy lives in the way God planned for them to live (the life of 'sanctification'), using the law of God ('third use of the law') as a guide for their lives. Even though Christians will fail, the Holy Spirit helps them to develop the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (Gal 5:22–25; Col 3:12–17) and to grow more Christ-like as they mature as Christians (Eph 4:13–16).

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Confession and absolution is sometimes dealt with under the heading the 'office of the keys'. This relates to the authority Christ has given to his church to forgive sins or not to forgive sins (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:22–23). Christ has authorised his pastors to use two 'keys' on his behalf: the key to 'loose' sins, forgiving those who repent of their sins, and the key to 'bind' sins, declaring unforgiven the sins of those who do not repent. [For much of his ministry, Luther regarded confession and absolution as a third sacrament (cf CC3).]

Public and private confession and absolution

While pastors are responsible on the basis of their ordination to exercise the office of the keys publicly, any Christian may hear the confession of a penitent sinner and give them absolution and assure them that God in Christ has forgiven their sins (Matt 18:15–18).

Public confession and absolution is normally part of the worship service. The people confess their sins publicly, and God forgives them through the words of the pastor who speaks on behalf of God.

Private confession and absolution occurs when Christians go to their pastor or to another Christian in private to confess their sins and receive absolution. This can be a very powerful practice when people are troubled by particular sins in their life. They hear words of forgiveness related directly to those things which are heavy on their consciences. This goes far beyond counselling (although it may arise because of it), because it is letting God deal with our sin rather than trying to ignore it, cover it over, or deal with it ourselves.

Confession

When we confess our sins publicly or privately, we acknowledge what God has already said to us in his word – that we are sinners who have sinned against God and our fellow human beings (Ps 51:4–5). Confessing our sins is something which we do, but it is not a 'good work' which 'scores points' with God. We are confessing so that we can hear God's sin-destroying and life-giving words.

In the Small Catechism, Luther teaches that before God we need to confess all our sins, even those of which we are not aware. However, in private confession, we should confess only those sins we are aware of and which trouble our conscience. Here Luther suggests using the ten commandments as a mirror to show us the sins in our lives.

Absolution

Absolution is the heart and centre of confession and absolution. We confess in order to receive forgiveness. Through the pastor, or through a fellow Christian, we hear God himself pronounce forgiveness. Jesus says, 'Whoever listens to you, listens to me.' (Luke 10:16).

[Note: It is very important in public worship that when there has been confession of sins, the words of absolution are clearly proclaimed. God's word does what it says: God forgives through the words of absolution. Often the absolution may be missing, or it is expressed as a prayer ('may God have mercy and forgive us our sins. . .) rather than as a declaration of God's forgiveness ('for Christ's sake, God forgives us our sins . . .').]

Although the words of absolution are spoken, forgiveness is only received by faith. This presupposes a life of repentance. In this way, the Christian is living in his/her baptism. Daily through 'contrition and repentance' our sinful nature is 'drowned' and the 'new person . . . come[s] forth and rise[s] up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever' (Kolb, Wengert: 360).

Christ has also given the authority not to forgive sins but to bind them to the conscience of the impenitent person. When this is done, it is always with the prayer that through this very solemn act the sinner will realise the severity of their situation, confess their sins and receive absolution.

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- When we say that in relation to salvation we have only one 'choice' – to reject the grace of God – what do we mean by this? How does this relate to 'free will'?
- How would you react to the statement: 'Your approach to education depends on your understanding of original sin'?
- What role do angels play in God's care and protection of human beings? (Some useful references: Matt 18:10, Ps 34:7; 91:11–12, Heb 1:14, Matt 4:5–7)
- How does the theodicy question present itself in the Lutheran school context and how can it be addressed?
- If people are involved in a human tragedy or disaster (eg tornado, terrorist attack, war, etc), how can we answer the question, 'Where is God in this situation?'
- What do we teach about eternal life? Do we emphasise the present reality or the future hope? What about eternal death?
- How might we use the understanding of Christians being both 'saint and sinner' in dealing with students in the school context?
- Can we expect greater evidence of 'holiness' in the lives of students and teachers in Lutheran schools than in schools of other agencies?
- Under what circumstances could confession and absolution be practised in the Lutheran school?
- How can the Lutheran school handle obvious and public instances of sin in the school community?

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