

Covenant,
Community,
and the Spirit

A Trinitarian Theology
of Church

Robert Sherman

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sherman, Robert (Robert J.)

Covenant, community, and the spirit : a trinitarian theology of church / Robert Sherman.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4974-3 (pbk.)

1. Church. 2. Holy Spirit. 3. Trinity. I. Title.

BV600.3.S485 2015

262.001—dc23

2015014069

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This book is dedicated to the members of All Souls Congregational Church, Bangor, Maine, and to the ministers who have guided us with such Spirit-filled faithfulness, wisdom, and grace over many years: the Reverend Dr. James L. Haddix, Pastor and Teacher, and the Reverend Renee U. Garrett, Minister of Christian Nurture

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Acknowledgments

This book has had a rather long gestation. In focusing on the Spirit's trinitarian role in relation to the Church, it was conceived as a complement to my earlier work, *King, Priest, and Prophet*, which emphasized the role of the Son in a trinitarian theology of the atonement. As with that previous book, I developed the basic arguments and did the bulk of my writing while a scholar-in-residence at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, in the spring term of 2009. That institution is an invaluable resource for the Church and for serious theological reflection in this challenging era. I want to extend a word of sincere thanks and appreciation to my colleagues for their thoughtful listening, suggestions, critiques, and encouragement. And I offer a special word of gratitude to the center's director, Dr. William Storrar, for his hospitality and support.

Of course, my stay at CTI was enabled by a sabbatical leave made possible by the president and trustees of Bangor Theological Seminary. To them, and to my faculty colleagues who helped hone my proposal and then bore my share of our common workload while I was absent, I say, "Thank you!"

As my sabbatical drew to a close, work remained to be done. But the demands of teaching and institutional challenges at BTS kept me from completing it. This delay did, however, allow me to present the main themes and particular content of the book to several more classes of students. I want to especially thank two who participated in a senior seminar, "What Does It Mean to Be the Church in This Time and Place?," Molly MacAuslan and Elizabeth White-Randall, for their thoughtful comments and encouragement. I also want to extend my appreciation as well to the members of our local pastor-theologian group. An offshoot of the Center of Theological Inquiry's

national program, this ecumenical gathering of ministers, professors, and students has met regularly since 2004 under the able leadership of Dr. James Haddix. While certainly grateful for the various insights each offered when we directly discussed the contents of this book, I am even more thankful for their general graciousness and collegiality regardless of the topic. Together, they have modeled how the Church should engage in theological and pastoral reflection.

I also want to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude to my wife of thirty years, the Reverend Dr. Carol J. Sherman. She has supported and encouraged me in ways too numerous to count. She is a woman of enduring faith, strong conviction, practical wisdom, deep spirituality, and boundless patience, good humor, and hopefulness.

Bangor Theological Seminary completed its last classes and celebrated its final commencement in June 2013, just shy of its two-hundredth anniversary. Founded while James Madison was president, the seminary educated generations of ministers who served northern New England and beyond: during the Civil War, the westward expansion of the United States, the heyday of nineteenth-century overseas missions, the Great War, the “Roaring Twenties,” the Great Depression, World War II, the boom years of the postwar era, the tumult of the sixties, the ups and downs of more recent decades, the September 11 attacks and their aftermath, up to the present day. For such an institution—having endured so many challenges through nearly two centuries and maintained an influence far exceeding its small size—to finally close its doors is, indeed, poignant. But the closure of BTS is also thought provoking. Times do change, yet the Church will always need pastors and teachers to serve as shepherds and to think about what it means to faithfully *be* the Church in differing times and places. Clearly, we are in a time of transition. What the Church will become, how we will understand and structure our common life, and where that life will lead us are not entirely clear at present. So my final word of acknowledgment and appreciation goes out to all those theologians, pastors, and thoughtful Christians everywhere who, open to the Spirit’s prompting, are seeking to discern the new paths to which the Lord is calling us.

Introduction

God summons the Church to proclaim in Christ through the power of the Spirit a transcendent life of exhilarating grace and love, to embody a world of forgiveness and reconciliation, and to offer a foretaste of reality so glorious and compelling that most people would find it inconceivable. The Church that God calls us to become is—of course!—a community that befits God’s own triune communion and majesty. And yet that Church is so much more than most people would even dare to imagine, let alone yearn for. Instead, it is all too common—even among faithful Christians—to be dissatisfied with the Church. But does our dissatisfaction arise because we ask too *much* of the Church or because we expect too *little* of it—and of God’s restoring and transforming power? Might it be that we no longer really know how to be the Church because we have lost the vision God has for us? Have we become too caught up in ourselves, our individual wants, needs, and desires—and perhaps especially our own disappointments?

In the North American context, individual Christians speak quite unself-consciously of “church shopping.” Church leaders respond with strategies for “marketing the Church,” which include developing demographic niches, advertising slogans, and programmatic innovations. In a consumer society, this is hardly surprising. Additionally, individual congregations and denominations are increasingly polarized along political, moral, generational, racial, socioeconomic, educational, and other demographic lines. All these factors bespeak a cultural captivity and theological impoverishment regarding what the Church can and should be according to God’s redemptive purposes and cosmic perspective.

Alternately, the “established” churches in Western European countries may have a status that in theory is the antithesis of American denominational fragmentation—and yet their churches are often empty on Sunday mornings, and popular culture finds them irrelevant, if not something to be mocked or resisted. My sense is that we need our ecclesiological imaginations reclaimed and reignited by a more biblical, theological, and pastoral vision of the Church: the community of nurture, accountability, and mission grounded in Christ and given life and a final purpose (*telos*) by the Holy Spirit. And I am convinced that many Christians hunger for more depth and substance in their common life and work and yearn to embrace such a Spirit-filled vision and reality.

My concern grows out of my classroom work as a professor training future ministers and my ongoing involvement in the life and mission of my local church. Teaching both seminarians and laypeople in my congregation, I have learned that many contemporary Christians in “mainline” or old-line denominations recognize the centrality of Christ but have only a vague sense of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work. They also tend to take the Church for granted without having any real sense of why it is theologically necessary. Many would perhaps acknowledge Spirit and Church as helpful to the individual Christian’s faithful living, while also assuming that such living is mostly a self-help effort. This repeats the ancient semi-Pelagian stance—although they would hardly know to label it as such! But most would be hard-pressed to describe the Spirit’s various roles in the divine economy of salvation, let alone acknowledge the Spirit’s particular work in empowering and undergirding the being and mission of the Church. Fewer still would likely recognize the Church as the divinely appointed community of nurture and accountability through which the Spirit typically empowers their life of Christian discipleship. What I write in the following pages seeks to address this situation.

A Trinitarian, Spirit-Focused Approach

My approach will be trinitarian in structure, grounded in a theological reading (rather than, say, a merely historical one) of the Bible as the Church’s authoritative scriptures, guided by some key affirmations of the Christian, especially Reformed, tradition and attuned to the practical concerns of contemporary pastors and Christians. While I intend it to be scholarly and theologically rigorous, this book is not aimed at other theologians or academics. Its target audience is instead the students I teach, local pastors such as those in my community, and thoughtful and curious laypeople like those in my home congregation. Americans lead complex, multifaceted, and challenging

lives. They know the value of education because their diverse professional lives require sophistication, skill, and expertise. Why should they be satisfied with only the theological concepts and resources they might have acquired as thirteen-year-old confirmation students? Shouldn't adult Christians have an adult theological sophistication?

Some might say that focusing on the Holy Spirit's activity within the Church presents a too-constricted understanding of the Spirit's work. As portrayed in the biblical witness, the role and work of the Spirit clearly encompass more than just ecclesiology. From the very beginning, God's Spirit has been involved with creation, granting life to the animate and providentially governing the inanimate. Likewise, the Spirit has been the power inspiring prophets, priests, and kings to do the Lord's bidding. Indeed, some echo John 3:8 to suggest that the Spirit is bound in no way: "the Spirit blows where it wills." Yet just as the Son, the eternal Logos, has a part to play in creation, so too did he have a particular role, taking on human flesh to become the crucified and resurrected Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. And it is this latter, more particular role that gives true insight into—even defines—the former, more general role. In a similar manner, I will focus in this book on the Spirit's particular work in establishing the Church, sustaining it in its witness and manifold mission, and bringing it to consummation. And this particular life-giving and perfecting work is the key for understanding the Spirit's more general movements in creation and history. It also indicates that just as redemption is a work of the Triune God, yet recognized to be the special divine work of the Son, so too is the Church a work of the Triune God, even while it may also be recognized as the special divine work of the Holy Spirit, who makes available the benefits of the Son and aligns the Church with the larger purposes of the Father.¹

So in one respect, I am narrowing my focus on the Spirit. But I do so to counteract the unfortunate tendency of many to place Spirit and Church in tension, if not actually in conflict with each other. (Need I repeat the clichéd rationalization for avoiding Church participation: "I'm spiritual but have no use for 'organized religion'"?) Scripture and tradition each recognize that the Spirit works not just in individuals in an isolated, charismatic way but within communities and even institutional proceedings and structures (e.g., Acts 15:28). I will allude to some of the broader works of the Spirit in this project but will consider these fully only when I address creation, providence, and eschatology in the first (but yet to be written) volume of my planned theological trilogy.

1. As one flag to highlight this special work of the Spirit, I have chosen to capitalize "Church" throughout this book rather than use the more common, lowercase "church."

Outline of the Book

I will begin with two introductory chapters. The first will set the stage of our creation by God as social beings, our collective fall from this original blessing, and God's covenantal plan for our final restoration and fulfillment. The second chapter will offer a "pneumatology," that is, a theological consideration of the Holy Spirit's place and role in the Trinity and the divine "economy of salvation," which is God's plan to redeem and reorient a fallen creation to his originally intended end. The heart of the book will then address the nature and purpose of the Church, fleshed out under the rubrics "The Body of Christ," "The People of God," and "The Temple of the Holy Spirit." Employing these rubrics to understand the Church is, of course, not original to my work. And neither are they the only images the Bible uses to elicit an understanding of the Church in its various aspects. Paul Minear's classic work *Images of the Church in the New Testament* discerned dozens of distinct metaphors, images, and descriptions of the Church. Most of these images were minor, and clearly more evocative than normative; yet others were more developed and have come to constitute how the Christian tradition understands the nature and role of the Church. My focus on these three rubrics hardly exhausts all the ways the Church could be conceived. It is instead meant to highlight the need for trinitarian balance in understandings of the Church: various ecclesial images and models need to complement one another. I will certainly consider several other biblical images or themes under each of these larger rubrics.

For example, in considering the Church as the body of Christ (chap. 3), I describe how this image provides the basis for thinking of the Church as God's gift of complementarity and structure for the community of faith. I will consider how individual Christians are incorporated into Christ's story and into the broader biblical narrative as their new "family history." One way this image of bodily union has been developed in the tradition is by means of the Church as the "bride of Christ," built on Scripture passages referring to husband and wife leaving their old lives behind to become one body. Another way this image has been developed is through more extended, multigenerational family imagery, particularly as that is related to an understanding of faith being transmitted and nurtured. Thus, the constitutive role of worship, preaching, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper will be examined. One concern will be to defend infant baptism, relating it to the following chapter's discussion of covenant. Among other points, I will develop the parallel between circumcision and infant baptism that the Reformed tradition has emphasized, the former being a typological foreshadowing of the more inclusive latter practice. I will also develop the connection between baptism

and communion, including an explanation of the view of “open communion” as a meal for baptized Christians. This chapter will include an examination of the institutional structure of the Church as a charismatic gift—but as a gift that then also necessarily entails certain responsibilities, as members of the Church (individually and communally) are nurtured and transformed. It will also address the relation between baptism and confirmation in terms of the Reformed rubrics of the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, the latter being the human response and pledge grounded in and oriented by the free gift of the former.

In examining the Church as the people of God (chap. 4), I will be concerned particularly to understand the Church within the broader sweep of the Father’s gracious covenantal purposes. In an explicit sense, this began with the covenant God established with Abraham and Sarah. Yet its origins extend back to creation itself and God’s eternal decree, while its culmination reaches out to the end of the age. I will describe how Jesus’s preaching on the “kingdom of God” stands in continuity with Old Testament understandings of Israel as a “holy nation” and “royal priesthood,” even as it transforms and fulfills those understandings. This chapter will also continue consideration of the biblical image of Israel as God’s bride, particularly as that is paralleled with the New Testament image of the Church as Christ’s bride. It will consider as well the perennial issue of how the Church should relate to “the world,” that is, how it is called to be “in the world but not of the world.” Another practical and pastoral goal in this chapter will be to give Christians a sense of the Church’s rootedness in and continuity with the faith of Israel. God’s covenant with the Church does not make God’s covenant with Israel “obsolete,” so there is no basis for Christian supersessionism. As Paul asserts regarding the election of the Jews: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29 RSV).

Finally, as I examine the Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit (chap. 5), one of my main goals is to address Christian holiness as a mark of our calling and fulfillment. Chapter 5 will therefore address how Christians should understand the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), “gifts of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:14), and the process of “discerning” and “testing” the spirits (1 Cor. 12:10; 1 John 4:1). Throughout I will again employ the underlying theme of the covenant, and develop the continuity between the Jewish understanding of Pentecost (the festival celebrating the giving of the law at Sinai) and the Christian understanding of Pentecost (when the Spirit was poured out in fulfillment of Jer. 31:31–34). In this discussion I will seek to reestablish the basis of Christian discipline and accountability by employing the classical notion of the “power of the keys” and the Reformed notion of “the third use of the law.”

A Future with the Church

A number of influential voices have said that the American Church now finds itself in a post-Christian age. This may be an overstatement for some parts of the country, but certainly for other parts and segments of the nation it seems quite accurate. While the United States has never had a legally established church, it has long had a “cultural establishment.” Those days appear to be fading. A corollary issue confronting the Church is the reality that for many faithful Christians, it is also a postdenominational age. On a practical level, the ecumenical movement seeking to overcome denominational differences has truly succeeded among the laity! New-member Sundays are often made up of individuals who have attended churches of various denominations over the years. Denominational loyalty remains most prevalent among the clergy and those working in denominational offices at a regional and national level. It seems clear that we are in a period of transition: we know where we’ve come from but are not yet clear where we are going.

That said, I believe that Christianity can survive a postdenominational age, but it cannot survive a postecclesial age. As theologian Robert Jenson has quipped, “To be sure, we are permitted to believe that the gates of hell will not finally prevail against the universal church, but there is no such guarantee for the Presbyterians or the Baptists.”² Denominations may prove to have been an appropriate response in a particular time and place—a providential expedient, if you will—but they are not necessarily essential. The Church, however, in some corporate or institutional form, *is* essential. I am concerned primarily with recovering and renewing biblical and theological themes, categories, and structures to help faithful Christians recognize and reclaim this essence, so that they may more clearly know and embrace God’s gracious call to join his holy assembly (*ekklēsia*), the Church.

Easter 2014

2. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 3.

1

The Story Begins

Communion: Human Being Is Social Being

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the *adam* should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Gen. 2:18)

We yearn for community because we were meant for community: it is built into our very nature as human beings. Created in the image of the Triune God, we are made to be in relation to God, to one another, and to God’s good creation. Our very existence is a gift from God, who, although self-sufficient in the eternal, loving communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, extends that communion by creating that which is not God. This is one of Christianity’s basic affirmations: the fact that anything exists at all stems from God, who has freely and graciously chosen to create a cosmos and to be in continuing relation with it. We truly *exist*. And we exist *distinct* from God, with our own being and ability to act. Creation is not merely an extension of God, an emanation from the divine being that has no true individuality. Neither is creation a kind of divine cloning that is at root an expression of divine egotism or even narcissism. Creation is truly different and unique, the result of divine graciousness that does not fear or begrudge or compete with the existence of beings other than God. To the contrary, God delights in having brought into existence a reality other than himself—and is even gracious enough to grant an analogous power to the creatures of that reality rather than make them depend always and only immediately upon him.

While God remains the fundamental and final source of all that is, we have also been made to depend upon one another. In any given moment, we depend upon one another through society and our interconnections with the natural world. And God has made these forms of interdependence to extend over time. The fact that any one of us exists derives from God's granting living creatures the power to exercise their own agency, including the capacity for procreation. As individuals, we do not make ourselves, and in an immediate sense neither does God make us. Rather, God exercises that power through the mediation of our parents, and we in turn become the means by which God brings about the next generation.

And while God has made us and desires to remain in continuing relation with creation, we humans have also been made in such a way that that relation is not automatic. God has embedded us in a fecund and malleable creation and in a relatively open-ended time. The future expands before us, and we cannot see over its horizon. We have been given freedom and power to choose from among multiple paths. Indeed, God grants and sustains us in the power even to turn away from him and his purposes for us. To be sure, given such a creation, with such agency and embedding, it should come as no surprise that Christianity also affirms that just as our origin is truly *understood* only in relation to God, so too is our end truly *realized* only through embracing in particular ways the divine and diverse creaturely connections that give us our lives. This contrasts with the modern Western emphasis on individualism. As Barry Harvey states it: "In place of the universal man posited by Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum*, therefore, the church proposes a radically different starting point for all thought and action: *Deus amat, ergo sumus*. From this ecclesial standpoint we learn that the purpose of our very being is to love as God loves."¹ At the heart of our being stands not the egocentric "I think, therefore I am," but the theocentric "God loves, therefore we are." Our truest fulfillment, both as individuals and in community, comes when we recognize and align ourselves with that depth and breadth of fellowship with one another and with God that God has intended for us from the very beginning.

Indeed, the Church has recognized this was God's intention even before "the beginning," in that this divine desire for communion was what motivated and structured God's very creation of the cosmos. This is the point to which the doctrine of election speaks: God's determination from before time to be *with* and *for* the humanity he would create. Described in technical intratrinitarian terms, it was the Father's will that creation be structured and oriented

1. Barry Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 161.

in this manner, which he accomplished through his “two hands” of Son and Spirit, the former being the *Logos*, the organizing principle, and the latter the *Pneuma*, the animating power of the one divine work of creation. In one strand of the Reformed theological tradition, this is understood as the *pactum salutis* (“counsel of peace”), the covenantal “work plan” established among the persons of the Trinity before creation itself.² Recall Jesus’s saying from Luke 14:28–30 (RSV): “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build, and was not able to finish.’” These words take on a whole new meaning and depth when we consider the cost God would gladly accept to enable his purpose to reach its fulfillment.

The Communal Nature of Human Nature

So while each of us is a discrete person, with his or her own innate and individual dignity and worth, we are also irreducibly social beings, in our origins, our ongoing existence, and our end. This will be a fundamental assumption of this book, grounded in the scriptural narratives that have formed Christian theology for millennia. The first of those narratives is the creation accounts in Genesis, and the last is a vision of a heavenly city at the end of Revelation. But it is also an assumption that a mere cursory reflection shows to be self-evident, even without appealing to explicitly religious presuppositions. Just consider: each of us is placed within a particular historical and cultural ecology, upon which we depend for our individual lives and to which we contribute for good or for ill. Our physical existence derives from a long chain of progenitors. Our psychological, linguistic, and spiritual existence is nurtured by family, friends, teachers, indeed, a whole cultural matrix rooted in the past and extending into the future. Our fears and concerns, our hopes and aspirations, are always fostered by and exercised within a particular communal context—itself typically a mix of subordinate and varied social networks—that we simultaneously receive and further. We did not give birth to ourselves, nor did we raise ourselves. Each and every one of us has a mother and a father, two sets of grandparents, four sets of great-grandparents, and so on back into the recesses of time. We are the offspring of complex, and by us largely unknown, webs of relationship. And none of us would have survived our infancy unless we had been raised by others: mothers, fathers,

2. See, for example, Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:194, 212–16, and Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 130–34.

grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, neighbors, friends. Those not raised in communities of caring—perhaps neglected in impersonal institutions, caught up in dysfunctional families or dangerous neighborhoods—typically suffer psychological and spiritual damage, which sometimes also manifests itself in a physical failure to thrive.

Even as we each increase degrees of self-sufficiency moving into adulthood, we remain more dependent than not upon the choices and labors of others. None of us do all of the following: grow our own food; make our own clothes; educate ourselves; manufacture our own tools; build our own houses; establish our own employment; care for ourselves medically; construct our own roads, bridges, or social infrastructure; provide for our own safety and security . . . This list could continue indefinitely—and so far includes only tangible aspects of our common life. It is just as true to say that none of us invent our own language, create our own worldviews, develop our own values, or are the sole author of any of the various elements of our intellectual, emotional, or spiritual landscapes. We may modify them as we grow older—or even reject them—but such changes always have the character of fine-tuning or resisting something already given. With only brief reflection, we recognize how our lives are inextricably intertwined with and depend upon those around us and those who have come before us.

And in the same way, those who will come after us depend utterly upon us. It is an inescapable biological fact that we are always only one generation away from extinction. And it is not just a matter of the sheer fact of existence. Continued existence is, of course, the necessary presupposition for anything else, but surely mere survival is not our only concern. Indeed, it is probably not our driving concern. For good or for ill, we must ask ourselves: what is the function or goal of human life? Human beings can survive just about anything other than the loss of meaning or purpose. What drives us? What will we bequeath to latter generations? Will we do our best to leave things better than we found them for our children? Or will we assume, either consciously or unconsciously, that the posterity about which previous generations were concerned somehow culminates and ends with us?

The *New York Times Magazine* once featured an article examining the writing of Jodi Picoult, a novelist who specializes in what the magazine described as the new “children in peril” genre.³ After opening with a summary list of the relentlessly gruesome variations in which Ms. Picoult has developed this genre (“terrible things happen to children of middle-class parentage:

3. Ginia Bellafante, “Jodi Picoult and the Anxious Parent,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2009, 36.

they become terminally ill, or are maimed, gunned down, killed in accidents, molested, abducted, bullied, traumatized, stirred to violence”), the article concludes with these words—words that are all the more chilling because the article’s author seems oblivious to their logical implication: “In so many of her books children seem like more work than most ordinary people can handle. If Picoult’s fiction means to say anything, it is that parenting undoes us perhaps more than it fulfills, and it makes a thousand little promises it can never keep.”⁴ If this is so, then the obvious response becomes: “So then why bother?” The fact that birthrates in many Western European nations have fallen below replacement levels suggests that for some, having children is indeed too much of a bother. Will we succumb to such generational hopelessness—or is it narcissism mixed with nihilism? Or will we transcend it? If the former, what explains such myopia and selfishness? If the latter, what are the ideas, habits, and structures that will enable us to think beyond ourselves?

Complemental Origins

The obvious answer to this last question is to look where God has placed us and what he has given us. We are social creatures, dependent upon God, upon the fecundity and predictability of the natural world, and upon the intricate interrelations of human society. This is how we were made, and, more to the point of this theological exercise, this is how we are *supposed* to be. The majestic cadences of the Bible’s opening account of the world’s creation describe the rich and varied natural context in which humanity is given life. That context abounds with a variety of inanimate and animate beings. Thus will the wild profusion of creaturely life expand and grow, with the creatures connected to one another in being (“according to their kind”) and through time (“be fruitful and multiply”). And the Bible’s opening account also makes clear how humanity at its most fundamental is not singular but plural: “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). That is, we are “social” from the start—and not just with one another, in splendid species isolation. Rather, God establishes our humanity in relation to the rest of the earth and in so doing charges us with a vocation, to be responsible stewards in exercising dominion over that earth (1:28), to till and keep the earthly garden (2:15). We alone among God’s creatures have been entrusted with a moral responsibility in our relationships, rather than being left to merely natural interactions. And in this we are also an image of the Triune God: we are given freedom to choose, just as God himself freely chose to create the cosmos in the first place.

4. *Ibid.*, 37.

In light of all this, it is worth noting that according to the biblical accounts of God's good creation, the first thing mentioned as "not good" was "that the human should be alone" (Gen. 2:18 NRSV modified). Having already established in Genesis 1:27 that humanity comprises female and male together, this second story functions as a negative way of saying the same thing: it is not good to construe human beings in isolation. This is said of the *adam*, the generic "human" made from the *adamah*, or "humus"—or, in another way of translating the Hebrew play on words, the "earthling" made from the "earth." At this point, the word is not so much a proper name as it is a generic description or label—and God recognizes that this creature needs a partner. First, he creates various animals to see if they can fill this role, but that is unsuccessful (2:19–20). So God causes the human to fall into a deep sleep and takes a rib from which to form a true partner. When the *adam* awakes and encounters this other, he calls her "woman [*ishah*], for out of man [*ish*] this one was taken" (2:23). In effect, the story implies, it is only after this divine surgery that the sexual dimorphism of humanity appears, as that is reflected in the changed Hebrew terminology: the single *adam* becomes woman and man. In other words, this story reaffirms the message of Genesis 1:27 that humanity's full being is fundamentally social, as originally and most basically represented in the complementary nature of male and female.

Of course, men and women have much in common, sometimes to the extent that individual women and men will have more in common with one another than they do with other members of their own sex. This may be due to nature or to nurture, or some combination thereof. If I need a transfusion, I obviously would prefer to receive it from a woman who matches my blood type rather than from a man who does not! Alternately, it is easy to imagine how a man and a woman from one time and place could have far more in common than either would with a member of his or her own sex from a different culture from a different era speaking a different language. And yet fundamental differences between men and women remain, both biologically and cross-culturally, which common experience confirms and ideologically driven agendas to the contrary cannot finally negate. True, those differences can be construed in ways that are in practice dysfunctional and inhumane (on which more below, when we discuss human sinfulness). And yet those differences are also an instance and sign that humanity is far more than the sum of its parts. When living as God intended, men and women bring the best out in one another: strengthening here, moderating there, balancing and completing one another's beings in ways that cannot be accomplished by either in isolation. Together, women and men create something more than

just themselves. The most obvious example is offspring, but such creativity and fruitfulness also extends far beyond the merely biological.

Something mentioned above helps confirm this point. It is self-evident that all human history, all human achievement, all human creativity has as an unavoidable prior condition the continuing procreativity of men and women. If there were no male or no female, humanity would disappear in one generation. The human chain would break and God's project would end. This is one of the reasons that the Bible so often spends time recounting various genealogies. It is not just that we are linked with those around us, but we are linked with those before us. Indeed, it is precisely these past links that join us with those around us even when other factors might work against our recognizing these connections. For example, some creation stories found in other cultures portray differing tribes or classes or groups as having divergent, even antagonistic, origins. The biblical accounts, by contrast, make clear that all humanity stems from one original pair. In other words, we are all related to one another; we are all one human family. Intriguingly, one branch of modern evolutionary theory converges with this view when it describes the human family tree as stemming from "mitochondrial Eve," located on the African continent.⁵

More significant, this recognition of common ancestry also produces certain moral imperatives. There used to be a common phrase—not heard much nowadays due to its dated terminology—employed to evoke empathy for others: "the brotherhood of man." The rhetorical force of the phrase was that we have an obligation to the well-being of others because we are one family; we share a common humanity. Conversely, if we lose this sense of a common humanity, what might be the moral implications? It is common in times of warfare for one side to denigrate the other, and one typical way of doing so is to imply or explicitly develop the idea that the enemy is "less than human" or "subhuman." This danger still exists. But other, newer threats to our sense of our common humanity are emerging. For example, what dangers might arise with the advance of certain medical technologies such as in vitro fertilization and cloning? If particular individuals are the product of human manufacture rather than procreation, do they run the risk of being construed as somehow less human? Fiction is already raising the specter of human clones produced for spare body parts. Could this possibly be considered ethical? The reaffirmation of our common humanity, of our embeddedness in a long

5. There is as yet no scientific consensus on this theory—and, it should be noted, the biblical accounts do not stand or fall on how these scientific arguments conclude. See Michael Brown's article "Mitochondrial Eve" on the Molecular History Research Center's website, <http://www.mhrc.net/mitochondrialEve.htm>.

line of progenitors, may be one way of resisting such new technologies and affirming the God-given sacredness of personhood.

Of course, to recognize humanity as male and female together is not to say that persons in isolation, whether male or female, are somehow less than human. Nor is it to say that all individuals must produce offspring in order to be truly human. It is rather to make the point (too easily overlooked in our modern, individualistic Western society) that no single person—whether male *or* female—can fully define humanity, because an accurate definition must always presuppose our irreducibly social nature. On this matter, the feminist critiques of older anthropologies are spot-on: if the human is defined solely on the basis of males, that definition will be not only incomplete but pernicious. The unique characteristics and tendencies more typically associated with females will not be included in what is “normatively” human and will thereby come to be dismissed as inconsequential or as an aberration. This is wrong descriptively and morally. It is an insight revealed earlier by Scripture, in the way the biblical creation stories both describe a fact about humanity’s constitutively male and female character and also assert our complementary equality. In so doing, these stories also provide a parable for all the other ways in which our existence as humans is irreducibly and undeniably social.

The Social Embedded in Time

As my observations have already implied, the social character of our lives is not an abstract or timeless reality. It cannot be captured in a snapshot that freezes us in some random moment. Rather, our lives are dynamic: the character of our social relations changes from day to day, from year to year, from decade to decade. Our human ecosystems are not just social and cultural but historical. Human life has an arc, both individual and corporate, and its full meaning is realized only over time. Each person lives in a particular time and place, with particular parents, particular connections, and particular possibilities laid before him or her. As an infant, each of us has these particularities impressed upon him or her with no real say in the matter. Each of us, for good or ill, is largely a passive recipient and utterly dependent upon those around us. As we mature and attain adulthood, that passivity is gradually augmented by a certain independence and our own individual activity. And yet our thoughts and actions never fully transcend our initial upbringing: they always reflect, whether through continuation or reaction, how, when, and where we were raised. And even when they edge into the creative and new, they are also always bounded by a particular cultural context. And as

we age, with weakened bodies and minds, we often return to a dependence on others not unlike that of our childhoods.

Has it been a good life? A hard life? A squandered life? A noble life? Who can finally say until one's life has reached its end in death? And even then, a thorough and true evaluation of a person's life may have to wait a generation or two. Considered in isolation, a given individual's life might appear to amount to little. But what if that person's contribution lies dormant until a later time, when suddenly it is recognized as the key element of some new wonder? Or what if that person has instilled in his or her child, student, or neighbor certain gifts that enable that child, now grown, to cure a deadly disease, to build a business, to invent new technologies, to stand up against an injustice, to create an inspiring piece of art, or to make some other contribution to the common good?

Generations have a similar arc, as do peoples, cultures, and nations. They frequently have a kind of collective personality. To those fluent in the current parlance of American popular culture, the label "Greatest Generation" refers to a particular age group and conjures certain very specific character traits. Similarly, we know who the "Baby Boomers" are, and the label elicits a different set of character traits. "Generation X," the "Millennials," and "Gen Z" are three additional sets. To be sure, generational stereotypes easily tend to caricature; yet even with the risk of oversimplification, real distinctions do remain. And as it happens, the distinctive personalities of these generations are often determined precisely through their interactions with, and reactions to, one another, and less by the particularities of their own historical eras. One generation vows to avoid the preoccupations or excesses of another and falls into the vices at the opposite extreme. And then, in spite of it all, how frequently does it happen that at some point, a member of a "younger" generation will be struck by the realization that "I've become my mother" or "I've turned into my father." This is when the arc becomes clear in a personal way—and the more perceptive among us recognize ourselves as recapitulating patterns greater than we are and more deeply embedded than our own choices and personal predilections. Particular differences do remain, contexts do differ, and we must remain attuned to them. Yet with a broader perspective, we also discern deeper commonalities and recognize that our variations are often simply variations on a theme. Immersed in the day-to-day, we need time and distance to come to know the bigger picture.

The biblical story recognizes this common experience, even as it portrays humanity in all its variation as fitting under a larger narrative arc. At their most basic, the Christian scriptures outline the whole human arc as beginning in a garden (Gen. 1–2) and culminating in a new heaven and a new

earth, centered in a city (Rev. 21–22). This biblical story is fundamentally concerned not with giving us the “facts” of human life but with describing the *meaning* of human life. The scientific disciplines might provide us with the details of the former, but they are not equipped to provide us with the latter. That requires a different, although complementary, discipline. The sciences explain natural processes, but they cannot explain humanity’s—indeed, creation’s—*purpose*. The sciences may tell us how a human body “works,” but they cannot tell us the grounds for a person’s innate human dignity. These must be found in a different kind of story. The trajectory of where we are from and where we are going is precisely the kind of “metanarrative” that the Bible provides.

Let me give an overview. First of all, the beginning of the biblical trajectory suggests that God’s intention for humanity as a whole is not to remain in a “natural” or static state. The earth exists as a dynamic, thriving place, full of potential and energy. This is part of the reason for the biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” (which, it should be noted, God gives to animals before giving it to humans; cf. Gen. 1:22, 28). On this basis, then, we have also been given a purpose, a telos or goal. Presupposing the instruction to be fruitful and multiply, humans are to follow a path in which *culture* emerges: not over against nature, but finally in harmony with the natural. This is signaled by the presence of the tree of life and the river in both the garden of Eden and the new Jerusalem (compare Gen. 2:9–10 with Rev. 22:1–2, 14, 19). Tragically, as the early chapters of Genesis make clear, this trajectory is disrupted by Adam and Eve’s sin, “the fall,” which estranges humanity from God and the natural order. Yet before I consider that fall more fully, it is worth noting that the course of human development is still traced in passages that hint how culture appears not merely as a result of human sinfulness but rather as an aspect of God’s original intention for humanity—even if that culture can itself become the victim and vehicle of human sin. Consider Genesis 4:17–22, which contains the first of Scripture’s many genealogical lists, while also describing the origins of the first city, the first appearance of certain trades (livestock herders, musicians, and toolmakers), and, apparently, communal worship (“At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD” [v. 26]). The ties of family, neighbors, commerce, the arts, and religion have grown up and become intertwined, all reinforcing and expanding upon the divine observation that “it is not good that the human should be alone” (2:18 NRSV modified). Even in a narrative that presupposes that a fundamental disorder has infected human existence, it remains clear that human fellowship or communion (*koinōnia*) is God’s original, continuing, and final intention for us, grounded in his eternal election.

The Fallenness of Human Community

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:8–13)

Pain and suffering exist. Only the naïve, oblivious, willfully ignorant, hermetically sheltered, or mentally incapacitated could not recognize this fact. Pain and suffering afflict individuals as well as communities. Physical agony and mental and spiritual anguish respect neither time nor place, neither social status nor ethnicity, not sex, nationality, nor any human distinctive. Indeed, they afflict not just humans but animals as well. To be sure, less biologically developed creatures may not have the nervous system necessary to experience psychological anguish, but it is hard to deny that something like it can afflict mammals, particularly primates. Pain and suffering are a seemingly unavoidable and universal characteristic of actual creaturely existence. But are they an *essential* aspect of that existence? And to raise the existential stakes further: are they *evil*? Even more, does existence have to be this way—that is, was it in some sense *intended* to be this way? If we answer yes, pain and suffering belong irreducibly to the very definition of existence—if that’s just the way things are, then our response should be obvious. We must simply learn to live with it. If, however, we answer no, it was not meant to be this way, that something has gone wrong, then this will elicit a far different response. Pain and suffering cannot remain a mere fact of life. Rather, they become something to be relieved and overcome; indeed, they may even be an offense, something that must be strenuously condemned, resisted, and defeated, if possible—in a word, something evil.

Consider your own experience. When did you first utter the complaint “That’s not fair!”? Probably as a child, in response to something done by a parent or a sibling, a friend or one of the “big kids.” Somebody did something to you—or left you out of something—and it hurt you or hurt your feelings. Something happened and you knew it wasn’t just an accident; it was a personal affront. You were offended, and you said so. You likely uttered the complaint not because of something happening to someone else or some

abstract inequality or injustice but in response to something happening to you directly, and your complaint was likely immediate. Now consider the implication of the words: you didn't just resign yourself to the situation by accepting that the person was bigger or had outsmarted you or got to operate by different rules. You didn't just acquiesce to the outcome by saying, "These things happen." You did recognize that something *had*, in fact, occurred, that this was now the way things *were*. But you refused to acknowledge that that was how things *should* have been. In other words, even at a young age you did not resign yourself to the worldview that "might makes right" or that blind fate rules or that those who were more clever or were insiders got to play the system to their benefit over against yours. You already had a deeply ingrained intuition that the bald fact that things are the way they are does not automatically mean that that is the way they ought to be.

Of course a full analysis like this presumably did not go through your head the first time you cried, "That's not fair!" But evoking the memory of this feeling indicates that even as a child, you sensed that individuals or circumstances could throw life out of balance, that things could go askew in ways that were not just unfortunate but wrong. A bad thing happened because someone intended to frustrate or hurt you—and that was just not right. You had an immediate sense that a certain event or a given reality represented a moral derailment in the world, and you felt a justified sense of moral indignation that it should be corrected and that someone should be held accountable for fixing it and (perhaps the same someone) should be punished for having caused it—although again, you probably did not phrase it precisely this way!

Cultivating Moral Discernment

To be sure, childhood perceptions should not be the last word in determining our mature perspectives on the world. After all, cries of "that's not fair" may well be self-serving. Still, on thoughtful reflection we will recognize that not everything we experience as bad is necessarily evil in a moral sense. Accidents do happen, as the result of unforeseen and unforeseeable circumstances beyond anyone's control, so there's not always someone who must be blamed. On other occasions, events may be morally ambiguous, and determining whether certain actions are morally right or wrong depends upon the specific details, context, and purpose. Certainly one could say that intentionally inflicting pain upon another person is wrong—unless, for example, one is giving that person a medical injection as an inoculation against a life-threatening disease. Having a needle stuck in one's body does hurt, but it is a pain worth inflicting and bearing for a greater benefit. Inflicting pain was

not the intention but rather an unavoidable consequence of what is, in itself, a moral act. Indeed, to withhold such an inoculation, and thus the inevitable short-term pain, from someone threatened with that particular disease would itself be an *immoral* act, because long-term suffering and death might otherwise occur. Yet clearly, if one simply approached a stranger on the street and stabbed him with a needle, one would be doing something immoral—and shouldn't be surprised if an assault charge followed. On yet other occasions, bad things befall us which, given our druthers, we would prefer to avoid. But once we have endured them, we may come to realize that they have benefited us in ways we had not anticipated. A disease or disaster strikes that wreaks havoc in our lives, but it calls forth a personal strength or family closeness that we otherwise never would have found. We have all heard cases where people reflect upon such tragedies with the words "I wouldn't wish it on someone else, or want to go through it again, but it's actually the best thing that ever happened for me."

So not everything bad is evil in a moral sense. In certain cases, moral language simply does not apply. If you were to fall off a cliff, you might immediately think to yourself, "Uh, oh. This is really bad." But in the few moments before impact, you probably would not hold gravity or the rocks below morally culpable for the injury or death that awaited you when you hit bottom. To blame gravity or the rocks would be to make a category mistake: they simply are what they are, having no choice or agency in the matter. However, if you were pushed, you would certainly have a justified sense of moral outrage—at least for a moment or two—toward the person who shoved you over the edge. You would blame the person who pushed you because he or she did have moral agency. The individual could choose to act, or not act, in one way or another, and could have been presumed to have some basic sense of right and wrong. So discernment is needed. Some acts may in fact be morally neutral, but other acts may be labeled quite appropriately, even necessarily, praiseworthy or blameworthy. The praise or blame may be qualified in certain cases: if a particular outcome is not what the person intended, if others also acted, if the act was done in a way that is usually innocent even if this time it caused harm, and similar mitigating circumstances. Still, the element of freedom and choice remains a presupposition of morality, as does some basic sense of right and wrong, both of which society expects of individuals once they reach a certain age. To be sure, in our everyday experience we recognize how a series of good or bad choices may develop into a habit, a kind of second nature or "default mode," such that in a specific instance the person acts not so much as the result of conscious choice but out of this pattern of previous behavior. Nevertheless, it is still

that individual who is acting or not acting in a particular set of ways, so that he or she remains ultimately responsible.

The Social Embeddedness of Evil

So why can't we all just make better choices and get along? Why is there such animosity, hatred, envy, greed, dissembling, and suspicion in the world? Why is there such violence on the part of some? Why such apathy—or secret support—on the part of others? Couldn't we just start a grassroots movement, beginning on an individual level, in which each person pledges to be kinder, more generous, more patient—simply put, to be more virtuous—while at the same time pledging to avoid such vices as lying, greed, violence, and the like? If individuals just worked to be more moral, wouldn't all the evil in the world eventually just disappear? In theory, of course. But experience teaches that this seemingly simple solution is unlikely to work because it relies on a simplistic notion of where evil is “located.” Clearly, individuals can be evil. Individuals can indeed engage in acts that bring suffering and misery not just to other individuals but to whole groups of persons. They can commit evil deeds the repercussions of which extend far beyond the immediate aftermath of the act itself, such that the overall consequences grow far out of proportion to the original incident, however horrendous.

This is why it does not suffice to locate immorality and evil solely in individuals. The repercussions of individual acts embed themselves in a broader context, so that the acts and their context then combine and interact in unexpected ways and, as a result, become the context in which further individual acts are done. (Christianity's take on which ultimately comes first—the individual or the context—is a philosophical and theological issue I will address in a moment.) The upshot is that the morally wrong, the evil, becomes systemic. That is, evil is a matter no longer merely of particular misdeeds but also of broader structures and patterns of being, of received cultures and thought worlds. Past acts shape the ways individuals and societies perceive reality; that perception then becomes the basis upon which individuals, groups, and whole societies engage in further actions—or refrain from acting. A reality established in part by previous actions (or inactions) and their entrenched effects thereby influences or even determines future courses of acting or not acting. In a very real sense, no *one* is to blame because to some degree all are complicit. The context is, after all, the product of a collective, and the context itself seems morally misaligned. And yet we recognize that while this is the way the world is, it is not the way the world should be. Somehow, the demands of moral accountability remain. In some way, we sense that not just individuals but the world itself need to be put right.

Sin

This sense that the world is, in some deep-seated manner, *disoriented* (which, of course, presumes it properly has a prior and more fundamental orientation) is precisely what the Christian doctrine of original sin describes. Up to this point I have presented matters in terms of good and evil, described in moral terms. But now what does it mean to introduce the notion of “sin” into the conversation? How does that help and, presumably, change the nature of the discussion? The first and most important thing to say is that sin is primarily a *theological* concept, and only *secondarily* an ethical or moral one. That is, by invoking the term “sin,” theologians are stating that the world’s fundamental orientation—and therefore its current disorientation—is in relation to *God*. Christian faith does not assume that the world exists in a kind of neutral space, that it is merely “natural.” Rather, Christianity affirms that the world is created by God, who intends for it to exist in a particular kind of continuing relation to him and a particular kind of interrelation with itself. In fact, God created human beings in a particular way so that they could be oriented to God and their fellow creatures in particular ways. These are the “design specifications” given us in our creation, and the realization of our truest selves happens when we live into them: we were made to be in loving relation with God and our neighbors. This is what truly defines us as human beings. However, when these design specifications of that creation and its relations are disrupted, when humans seek to define themselves by themselves (whether through a self-aggrandizing pride, through a self-negating abasement, or in some other manner), in isolation from their proper relation to, and true fulfillment in, God, they fall into a state of sin. On the basis of this fundamentally *theological* understanding, the notion of sin may then be said to have a derivatively ethical meaning. In that sense, sin describes both a state of being and ways of acting.

SIN AND SINS

One way to illustrate this point is to repeat a commonly used distinction, namely, the contrast between “sin” and “sins.” “Sin” is the fundamental orientation away from God and the persistent inclination to disobey God; “sins,” which are the *fruit* of sin, are the wrongs one does in relation to the neighbor. In other words, they are the negative image of, or antithesis to, the two tables of the Decalogue and the Great Commandment, both of which present our duties to God and neighbor in a definite order. That is, the first commandments of the Ten Commandments have to do with one’s proper relation to God, and the ones that follow, with proper relations among humans (Exod. 20:1–17; Deut.

5:6–21). The same is true with Jesus’s response to the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁶ This scriptural order is the basis for the succinct quip sometimes attributed to Saint Augustine: “Love God, and do what you will.” The point is that if one’s love is rightly ordered first toward God, then one’s love of neighbor will be a rightly ordered natural by-product. Conversely, in the case of sin there is a definite “disorder.” Once the proper relation to God is disrupted, inappropriate relations with our neighbors are bound to follow.

THE PERSISTENCE OF SIN

So, original sin speaks to the sense that underlying various immoral or evil acts is a fundamental disordering or corruption of our being, with “being” understood in systemic and collective, as well as individual, terms. It is not just individuals who are “fallen” but the context in which they exist. And this context includes the historical: original sin speaks to the temporal dimension of our existence. In other words, original sin is in some sense hereditary. But that raises the question, how is it inherited? Now it is true that in centuries past, Christian theologians appealed to the science of their day in seeking to explain how sin was passed down from our first progenitors. One biblical text seemed suggestive: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:2–5 RSV). To some premodern ways of thinking, this made it sound as if original sin were inherited biologically. Yet other descriptions were more nuanced, making distinctions to demonstrate that the use of biological categories is to be taken not literally but metaphorically.⁷

Certainly, as we have come to refine our scientific understanding of the world, more strictly biological explanations have simply become implausible.

6. Matt. 22:36–40//Mark 12:28–31. Cf. Luke 10:25–28.

7. Consider, e.g., Saint Anselm’s description, written in the eleventh century, which recognizes scriptural references to sin being passed down at conception or in the male “seed” as being true, but not literal. In other words, they describe an inherited human reality, but the apparently biological terms are figures of speech, not descriptions of the actual process. See Anselm of Canterbury, “Why God Became Man,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1956), 10:192–93.

Especially in light of modern understandings of evolution and genetics, we know that, biologically speaking, acquired characteristics are not inheritable. For example, if a person loses a limb to amputation, that individual's future offspring will not be born minus that limb. If a person gains wisdom through long study and hard work, that individual's future offspring will not as a result be born more intelligent. By analogy, our ancestors' morality or immorality is not something we inherit by way of our genes. Yet the notion of inheritance is not completely misplaced, because the sensed reality of a world gone askew remains. It is not just that evil too often occurs, but that it seems inevitable, as somehow given. Life's deck seems stacked; we know we're not the ones responsible for stacking it; yet there doesn't seem to be anything we can finally do about it—it's just always been that way. It is this perception, this intuition—namely, that we inherit a world that is fundamentally disordered in ways that are morally deplorable—to which the Christian doctrine of original sin speaks. Some might consider the doctrine outdated, especially if its essential insight is understood to be inseparable from a biological explanation.

SIN'S PERSISTENCE AS A CULTURAL INHERITANCE

The doctrine, however, does not stand or fall with this particular approach; with a different tack, it still has explanatory power and insight. For example, while it may not be fruitful to view original sin as a biological condition, it can be enlightening to recognize the reality to which the doctrine points as a *cultural* condition, because acquired *cultural* characteristics *are* inheritable. In this sense, the doctrine describes not a biological defect but an existential inevitability grounded in our social and historical existence.⁸ In other words, no matter how hard we try, no matter the success of efforts to counter it here, the disorder and corruption always reemerge, often in a different manner and frequently worse than before. The doctrine of original sin simply recognizes in a clearheaded manner that sin is a recurring and universal aspect of the human condition, both on an individual and psychological level and, more insidiously and pervasively, on a social and historical level. One need not affirm a literal Adam and Eve eating a literal fruit in a literal garden to recognize how this story speaks to a real and verifiable truth about human existence: that individual acts of sin and evil tend to grow and take on a life of their own.

8. The mid-twentieth-century theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr wrote often on various aspects of systemic sin, a theme perhaps captured most tellingly in the title of his classic work *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1932). A more contemporary but also powerful treatment may be found in the work by Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

In fact, one can argue that the Christian notion of original sin allows for a fuller and more adaptable explanation of reality and our lived experience than some other common views. Consider, for example, its contrast with a still-influential perspective from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which described the individual as being born with a *tabula rasa* (a “blank” or “clean slate”). This notion holds that each person, in effect, engages life with the same existential option possessed by Adam and Eve. That is, each individual has volitional autonomy, able in each moment to freely choose between the good and the bad, with no prior “bent” or bias. In addition, it assumes that our natural and social context is rather uncomplicatedly open and amenable to human industry and management. This approach is admirable for its clarity and its encouragement of individual moral responsibility, and it has been fruitful in many ways.

Yet especially in light of the twentieth century’s totalitarian movements and massive horrors of war and genocide, it also seems unrealistically optimistic and inadequate for the task of explaining the complexity and intransigence of the human condition. In this regard, the Christian doctrine is simply better equipped to explain the paradox and tragedy of our lives. It acknowledges that sin can manipulate our institutions, laws, cultural mores, and “group identities,” whether family, ethnic group, national history, or the like. Another key claim is that sin affects our attitudes and moral choices in ways of which we might not even be aware. Thus, for example, when the theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr acknowledges—with distinct Christian qualifications—the insights of psychology to describe how our subconscious can influence, even determine our actions,⁹ this is more in keeping with the views of original sin than the Enlightenment views just described. Original sin is like a virus: its parasitic existence depends upon a host, and while it may be very simple in itself, its power and persistence are due to its ability to adapt. It is a constantly moving target made even worse by its capacity to masquerade as the desirable and good.

Different cultures, different generations, different eras each have their distinct personalities and characteristics, for good and for ill. For example, one characteristic of contemporary Western culture seems to be its overwhelming desire for uniqueness—perhaps an inevitable desire, given the repetitive sameness of a mass, even global, economy and the omnipresence of mass media. In our particular time and place, we are obsessed with the new and different: anything that will help us stand out from the crowd, to gain celebrity. Thus, an

9. Note the various references Niebuhr makes to Freud’s claims in his Gifford Lectures, published as *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 34, 36, 42–44, 52–53, 121.

ancient vice—vainglory—appears in brand-name, designer clothes.¹⁰ And this obsession displays a remarkable egalitarianism. Whether low-brow, middle-brow, or high-brow, whether in our professional lives or our personal lives, whether in public life and entertainment or private lives and consumption patterns, we just can't seem to get enough of the latest thing. Yet if we were honest with ourselves, we would recognize that there simply isn't enough of the new and different to satisfy our seemingly insatiable appetite for it. This is not to say that the new and different doesn't happen; it's just that it doesn't typically happen at the relentless pace and quantity that our desires demand. Even the briefest reflection on the actual flow of our lives will show this to be true. Think of cyberspace: how much of what goes out on tweets or personal blogs is really new and different? Think of cable news cycles and popular entertainment: they entice you into thinking they have some new insight or perspective, but you quickly realize how repetitive they are.

In my own professional environment of the academic world, the ideal insists that dissertations, articles, and books be original, new, and cutting-edge. The reality is that even the best scholars typically only engage variations on a theme, perhaps adding a minor adjustment here or a minor new insight there. Yet the pressure to be new and different is so great that it often only produces its own self-caricature. If the latest fashion is to be “X,” then the way to be original is to assert “anti-X”—or to combine various and wildly disparate elements and assert that far from being an arbitrary or wildly contradictory combination, they are in fact deeply intertwined in ways that no one but the author has had the brilliance to notice before. After a while, one cannot help but think that the sage of Ecclesiastes had the more accurate take on things: it is vanity to think there is anything new under the sun (see Eccles. 1). This is not so much a universal and all-encompassing claim that nothing new *ever* happens as it is an unmasking of the delusion and arrogance that the old no longer applies because we have moved on to the new. “That was then, this is now” is not so much a descriptive statement of conditions as it is a declaration not to be constrained by what has gone before. Underlying rules, eternal principles, natural laws are not recognized as such but are said to be outdated and no longer applicable.

“ORIGINAL SIN” REFLECTS REAL LIFE—AND POINTS TO OUR HOPE

Another word needs to be added, especially for those who may tend to react against the whole notion of “original sin” as somehow outdated or

10. For a very accessible and insightful treatment of the vices-and-virtues tradition, see Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

off-putting. While popular treatments of original sin often identify the particular sin involved in caricatured ways (usually having something to do with lust), the Christian tradition has actually explained it in a number of ways over the centuries. The Western Christian tradition, influenced as heavily as it is by Augustine, has often spoken of sin as humanity's willful disobedience to God. Here the emphasis has been on human guilt, with humanity sometimes characterized as a "mass of perdition" (*massa perditionis*) that deserves nothing better than damnation. We might not like it, but given the carnage of the twentieth century, we should probably concede the description is not without justice. Willful human evil is certainly a reality.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition does not ignore this way of thinking, but from its early centuries, it also developed another viewpoint. One example stems from the second-century theologian Irenaeus. He spoke of Adam and Eve's original sin as less a matter of willful rebellion and more a kind of youthful indiscretion that nevertheless had very unfortunate consequences. In this strand of his thinking, the emphasis is less on their guilt than on their need for increased maturity, for growing into faithfulness.¹¹ And, of course, other theologians have pointed out that Adam and Eve are as much the victims of sin as the perpetrators, in that most of the blame should fall on the serpent who tempted them.¹² While the original Genesis account does not itself make the connection, later tradition of course understood the serpent to be Satan, now subjecting humanity to the bondage of sin and death.¹³

In other words, there are various approaches in the tradition—and the tradition continues to allow for variation. I gave my own general definition above with these words: when humans seek to define themselves by themselves (whether through a self-aggrandizing pride, through a self-negating abasement, or in some other manner), in isolation from their proper relation to, and true fulfillment in, God, they fall into a state of sin. This diverse understanding of the nature of humanity's fall corresponds to the Christian tradition's multifaceted understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ's saving work,¹⁴ but that is not the reason for noting that fact here. The point is rather to acknowledge that Christian theology has long recognized the insidious

11. See Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 47, and John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 217–21.

12. After all, once God realizes what has happened, he first curses the serpent. See Gen. 3:13–15.

13. See, for example, the classic study by Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 20–28.

14. I address this diversity and seek to provide an overarching unity for it in my work *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

complexity of human sinfulness and its continuing ability to mutate into new and different forms. It knows that if one misunderstands or underestimates one's enemy, one is bound to fail.

One final dilemma, which also often goes against our grain, is the apparent absurdity that we're "free" only to sin yet are nevertheless responsible for that sin. This is indeed tragic. But it is also a necessary assertion if we are to be respected seriously as moral agents—as moral adults, rather than as mere children who don't know better. Or, more insidiously in our day and age, as victims of a kind of disease or mental disorder that needs therapy rather than accountability. After all, to resolve the dilemma by saying that either we are not free or that we are not responsible would leave us with fatalistic determinism or moral anarchy. And, of course, according to the biblical witness and Christian faith, God does not surrender us to this fallen state but instead initiates a way for the world finally to be redeemed from the power and consequences of sin and evil in the world. The extent, complexity, and durability of evil allow no simple or simplistic solutions. When such solutions are attempted, they often merely compound the problem, either directly or through the law of unintended consequences. Any enduring solution will have to be more deeply rooted and pervasive; complex and able to adapt; cultural and historical in a way mirroring the sin itself; and durable to the point of being eternal.

Salvation Will Be Social *and* Individual: Establishing Covenant, Setting the Pattern

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:1–3)

So the biblical story—and if we are not completely oblivious, our own experience—throws us into a quandary. We know our own yearning for connection: for families that are whole, for communities that are vibrant and thriving, for nations that are at peace and productive, for a planet that is healthy. We have the theological affirmation that *koinōnia*, or "fellowship," is God's intention for us originally, now, and in the fullness of time. Recall the discussion above (pp. 1–3): it was the Father's desire to be in special relation with the human beings he would fashion, so he covenanted with the Son and the Spirit to order and animate precisely such a creation. The winsome image of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day to be with the man and the

woman he has made evokes the intimacy he intended—and yet by then, heart-breakingly, that intimacy had already been broken and lost (Gen. 3:1–13). And that loss reverberates and grows down the ages: we know how broken we now are, and how intractable that brokenness is. Alienation and animosity across cultural, ethnic, racial, class, and political lines thrive. We are distanced from the natural world in our urban settings or are overwhelmed by the natural world through tsunamis, earthquakes, or pandemics. Believers of various faiths clash with one another—and they are all repudiated by secularists and increasingly dogmatic atheists. And overall, the human capacity for self-destruction and environmental devastation grows at a seemingly uncontrollable rate. In such a situation, even those individuals or groups who by any objective standard possess substantial power and influence can feel helpless.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹⁵

What can one person do when whole demographics feel disenfranchised? Who hasn't at times been overcome by a sense that the best course of action would be to wipe the slate clean and start over?

Genesis: Book of Beginnings

The biblical book of Genesis is the Bible's book of beginnings. This may seem so obvious as to be not worth mentioning, given the opening verse: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It's clearly meant to be the start of the story, an ancient equivalent to our "Once upon a time . . ." One has to start somewhere, and such words are the literary device that serves this function. True, opening words like these are actually rather arbitrary, but typically we go along with them—because otherwise, how would we ever get into the story? How can one get farther back than the beginning? The anecdote is told of Martin Luther, who, when asked what God was doing before creation, responded, "Cutting sticks to beat people who ask such silly questions." The image of a too-smart-for-his-own-good student trying to divert his teacher from the lesson does come to mind. But we should not let Luther's reply prevent us from recognizing what we have already noted: that God had a purpose in creating, namely, deep communion between God, humans, and

15. From William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," 1920.

the whole created order. And it seems safe to assume further—God is indeed God, after all—that he would not let human waywardness and sin derail that purpose in the long run. In fact, the Father, who made creation through his Word and Spirit, will now redeem, reconcile, and re-create that fallen world through his Word and Spirit. In this unfolding story, the “order of creation” has now been joined by the “order of salvation” (*ordo salutis*).¹⁶

In other words, the Bible’s “book of beginnings” describes not just the beginning of the created order; it also describes the beginnings of God’s unfolding plan of salvation. The former description—from the account of the first six days followed by a day of rest, to the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace—occupies only the first three of fifty chapters. But if one considers the whole of the book, from its first chapter to its last, as the book of beginnings, one can more clearly recognize how the book as a whole sets the stage and establishes the covenantal patterns for everything that follows in the subsequent thirty-eight books of the Old Testament¹⁷ and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Genesis is the book of beginnings for the Bible because it establishes who the characters are, describes their behavior (which is simultaneously concrete and typological), and sets the foundation for the major and minor themes that will thread through the remainder of Holy Scripture. Genesis is not a treatise of abstract philosophy or theology; it is a story describing God’s creation of the world and God’s continuing interactions with that world, especially with humans. It is not mythology (presenting timeless, ideal truths) but saga (which takes the shifting particularities of history and its actors seriously and understands them as “going somewhere”).¹⁸ It sets certain parameters, ruling certain deeds or paths as “in,” while excluding

16. There is debate within the Reformed tradition as to whether God established this “order of salvation” *before* the fall, indeed, before creation itself (“supralapsarianism”) or in some sense *after*, and in response to, the fall (“infralapsarianism”). The impetus for the debate is concern for what each position seems to imply about God: those advocating the first view hold that the infralapsarian position suggests that God was “surprised” by the fall and had to improvise a response (seemingly undermining divine omniscience). Those advocating the second view hold that the supralapsarian position can be taken as saying the fall was somehow necessitated by this prior decree, hence implicating God in evil (seemingly undermining divine justice). For a helpful summary and some brief historical examples, see William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith, eds., *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *Classical Beginnings, 1519–1799* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 107–15. While I understand the logic and concerns of each camp, the position of this book does lean to the supralapsarian side—but understood along the lines of Karl Barth, who held that the true subject of the Father’s eternal election, both condemnation and justification, was Jesus Christ.

17. The number is based on the common Protestant usage, which does not include the books of the Apocrypha included in Roman Catholic versions of the Bible.

18. See Karl Barth’s insightful discussion of this distinction in his *Church Dogmatics* III/1, §41, “Creation and Covenant” (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), esp. 60–94.

others. And it establishes certain templates or interpretive patterns for understanding, evaluating, and anticipating future deeds, characters, and outcomes. It also points to where God desires ultimately to bring us.

Noah and Babel

As I have already discussed, the opening chapters portray God's creation of heaven and earth and creation's forward movement in time in a recurring rhythm of seven days. These chapters describe how God, humanity, and the earth are meant to relate to one another, as well as the ways creatures disrupt that intended relation through the fall: our life together is broken. The communion in which and for which we were created has been disordered and corrupted. The serpent manipulates the divine commands in speaking to Eve. In consuming the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve violate their communion with God and in the process turn upon one another and bring upon themselves an alienation from the earth itself. In the heritage of this broken trust and alienation springs the first murder as Cain kills his brother Abel. Simultaneously, the Bible describes God's just and merciful response to that disruption, and then portrays the emergence, for good and for ill, of human culture and politics. Within ten generations, however, the "LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen. 6:5–6). On its own, humanity stumbles from bad to worse, such that the whole world becomes corrupt. So God decides to wipe the slate clean, with only Noah finding favor in his sight. God gives Noah the task of building the ark, which is to save him, his family, and male and female representatives of each of the animals from the coming deluge. Why a flood? It signals that God is taking things back almost as far as the original, precreation void, when darkness was upon the face of the deep and "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2 RSV).

But note: God does not take things *all* the way back. Instead, he calls upon a segment of humanity to maintain continuity and to further the divine will, and makes his relationship with this remnant explicit through a covenant (Gen. 6:18). When the waters of the flood recede and he smells Noah's burnt offering, God also vows to himself: "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Gen. 8:21b–22). In other words, the stage of God's

original creation project will be sustained: in spite of our sin, God still grants us a place and a time. God then blesses Noah and his three children, repeating to them his original commission to humanity (“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”)¹⁹ and clarifying the new ground rules, revised since Adam and Eve in light of the circumstances.²⁰ Next, God reiterates his covenantal vow and explicitly extends it to all living creatures “for all future generations.” Finally, God places his war bow²¹ in the sky as a reminder of his promise never again to let loose the waters of primordial chaos (Gen. 9:8–17).

So how does all this remain a matter of “beginnings,” nine chapters into the book of Genesis and ten generations into the human history there described? It remains so by setting the stage and establishing the patterns of how God will interact with humanity for the remainder of the story. One may assume that God’s purpose and intentions for creation have not changed, but given our finitude, recalcitrance, and sin, God has accommodated himself to humanity’s present condition. In other words, God has already shown himself to be a God of righteousness *and* mercy. God is not simply an arbitrary hierarch of inflexible demands. Rather, God’s power is in service to his justice, his compassion, and his original intentions, in such a way that he will even obligate himself to his creatures by entering into a covenant with them. God is indeed almighty, but according to this covenant with Noah, God has now taken certain options off the table in dealing with humanity, indeed, with the whole earth.

So what does humanity then do? (Note well: it is essential that Noah and his family be recognized not just as isolated figures, as specific individuals from “back then,” but also as our ancestors, as members of our family whom we must properly acknowledge. In this way, Noah also serves as a representative figure, an “everyman” in whom we can also see ourselves.) Humanity falls back into its bad habits. The survivors of the flood do multiply, and the first peoples and nations emerge and go about their filling of the earth. And yet as if the sins of individuals and small groups were not enough, eventually the power and presumption of the human collective appears. One people builds a city and proposes to build a tower up to the very heavens. God scatters this people and confuses their languages, and is then portrayed taking a different tack in guiding creation to the goal he originally intended for it.

19. Gen. 9:1, which echoes Gen. 1:28.

20. That is, human food is no longer limited to plants, although the consumption of blood is restricted because it is understood as containing life itself. Moreover, the punishment for murder is specified, in light of Cain’s murder of Abel.

21. We moderns should not sentimentalize the rainbow as a merely benign and beautiful natural occurrence: to ancient eyes it represented the multicolored bow carried by the king, or in this case, by God. Cf. Lam. 2:4; Hab. 3:9–11.

Abraham and Sarah

Rather than covenanting with humanity in general, a situation that might in the natural course of events seem to favor those peoples and nations that are politically powerful and important in human terms, God instead seeks out an obscure old man and his wife, a couple beyond childbearing years, to make for himself a new people: “And by you,” God tells Abram, “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12:3 RSV). This is, of course, the covenant that God will establish with Abram and Sarai—later renamed Abraham and Sarah—calling them to leave their home in order to grant them a new land, and offspring, and a name that will endure down through the ages. It may seem curious that this covenantal blessing takes a meandering path and a fair amount of time to unfold. Yet this slow and circuitous unfolding is itself a divine lesson for Abraham and Sarah; it also foreshadows the character and pace of God’s covenantal activity in the rest of Genesis—indeed, in the remainder of the biblical story. God begins with the smallest human unit, a male and a female. Abraham and Sarah are, of course, descended—through Noah and his family—from Adam and Eve. They continue the human lineage begun in the garden, even while also representing a recapitulation of the first couple and thereby serving as a new beginning. Unlike Adam and Eve, however, their offspring come not after the divine command to use the procreative powers given them at creation but as a result of the divine promise given in this new covenant. That promise will come to fruition, but as the unfolding story exemplifies, it will do so according to God’s timetable and often unexpected actions. In the narrative itself, this often means that God’s activity recedes from view, only to be recognized by the characters occasionally or in hindsight. I will speak to this point more fully below.

The passage just cited (Gen. 12:3) occurs when Abram is in the land of Haran, from which the Lord summons him to travel to the land of Canaan. He goes, taking with him Sarai and his nephew Lot and his wife. God again encounters Abram in Canaan, showing him the land his descendants will inherit (12:7). But a famine soon drives them all to seek refuge in Egypt. Eventually they return, and when Abram and Lot divide the land between them, God once more speaks to Abram regarding the land (13:14–18). Sometime thereafter, warfare erupts in the area, and Lot is taken captive. Abram assembles a small army, achieves victory, and secures Lot’s release. Yet for all his worldly success, Abram still does not have an heir. God again comes to reassure him, showing him the night sky and promising that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Abram believes him, and the Lord “reckoned

it to him as righteousness” (15:2–6). At this point God consummates or “cuts” a covenant with Abram (the “cutting” referring to the sacrificial animals cut in two, between which the smoking fire pot and flaming torch of God pass), formally sealing the promise of his descendants and the land (15:7–21). In the idiom of such covenantal practices, it was the weaker partner who passed between the sacrificial pieces, vowing that such would happen to him should the covenant be broken. Astonishingly, in this instance God takes this malediction upon himself, even when it is not he but his human partners who will break the covenant. Christians, of course, recognize him as finally taking this curse upon himself centuries later in Jesus’s crucifixion.²²

Yet in the more limited time frame of Abram’s perspective, the promised offspring still does not arrive. So Sarai determines that her husband should produce an heir through her servant girl Hagar. Hagar conceives, and, perhaps not surprisingly, relations between the two women sour. Hagar flees for her life and that of her unborn child, but an encounter with an angel of the Lord reassures her and sends her back, to give birth to Ishmael, whom Abram raises as his own.

Thirteen years later, God again appears to Abram, reaffirming his covenant, changing Abram’s name to Abraham, and instituting the covenantal sign of circumcision. God also changes Sarai’s name to Sarah and reiterates that she will bear Abraham a son. Abraham laughs at hearing this, given his and Sarah’s age, while also expressing his concern for Ishmael. God reassures Abraham that he will care for Ishmael but that his covenant will be with the son Isaac, whom Sarah will bear in a year’s time. When God departs, Abraham follows through on the command to circumcise all the males of his household (Gen. 17:1–27). The next time, when the Lord appears to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, it is Sarah’s turn to laugh at the thought that she might bear a child at her advanced age. The Lord overhears her laughter, which she is suddenly too embarrassed and fearful to admit. Yet his response, in the form of a rhetorical question, lingers: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (18:1–15, esp. 18:14a, RSV). The answer, of course, is no.

However, the episode that immediately follows the encounter at Mamre makes it clear that in his acts, God wills to include his chosen ones. Heading toward Sodom, the Lord asks himself: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after

22. See Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 78–79, 159–62.

him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:17–19 RSV). Abraham immediately demonstrates his willingness to “keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice” when he implores God not to destroy the city, lest he also slay any righteous remnant there (18:23–33). One cannot help but think that God smiled at Abraham’s audacious appeals for mercy, as he bargained with the Almighty to spare the wicked multitude for the sake of the righteous few. Of course, given the final destruction of both Sodom and Gomorrah, it became apparent that not even ten righteous persons remained in the two cities.

Finally, the Lord visits Sarah when he had said he would, and does as he had promised. She conceives and bears Abraham a son, whom he circumcises at the appointed time, as God has commanded (Gen. 21:1–4). Yet it does not take long for Sarah’s resentment of Hagar to rekindle. She sees Ishmael as a threat to the inheritance due Isaac and wants the rival and her son both sent away. Abraham is displeased because he has fatherly concern for both lads, but God tells him to accede to Sarah’s wishes, reassuring him that he will care for Hagar and Ishmael. Life then appears to settle into a routine for a man of Abraham’s position and prosperity: matters of resolving property disputes, settling water rights, and establishing peaceful relations with neighboring tribes. However, it is precisely in the midst of such routine that God comes again:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven,

and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Gen. 22:1–18 RSV)

The “binding of Isaac” story is one of the most famous passages in all of Scripture—and one of the most challenging. For millennia, Jewish and Christian thinkers have wrestled with its meaning and implications. For the purposes of this book, however, I want to focus on only two points. First, the passage obviously emphasizes Abraham’s deep trust that “the LORD will provide.” To understand the full importance of this affirmation, we must remember the context in which the whole saga began, namely, a fallen world, “wiped clean” for a new start following the flood. God is working out his redemptive purposes for creation and will make whatever provision is necessary so that those purposes are not derailed. The words “the LORD will provide” do not just speak of Abraham’s faith in this specific episode but serve as an affirmation for all the faithful whatever the circumstance. That is why the narrator includes Abraham’s naming of the place and the telling phrase “as it is said to this day.”

The second point is, I believe, less obvious: while God clearly covenants with specific persons at specific times and specific places, working with and through them to fulfill his purposes, that work cannot be reduced to merely natural processes. Recall my earlier suggestion that God did not covenant with humanity “in general” because in the usual course of events that would tend to favor those who are powerful and important in human terms. In a similar manner, even when choosing this obscure, elderly couple, God did not so embed his purposes in the natural offspring of Abraham and Sarah that the success of those purposes stood or fell with the character—or even survival!—of that offspring. But just as Abraham had faith in God to give him and Sarah a son past their natural childbearing years, so too did Abraham

have faith in God even when it seemed God would take that son away—and with the son, the hope that God himself had given Abraham regarding his descendants! Trusting in God, he regained his son, and countless blessings besides. In this, Abraham actually exemplified what Jesus later commanded: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt. 6:33).

Scripture certainly makes clear that God desires our covenantal partnership, to serve his purposes and our spiritual transformation. But Scripture also makes clear that God will work out his purposes not only with us, but without us, and at times in spite of us. And this realization can actually be a source of reassurance (as well as a continuing prompt to align ourselves more fully with the divine will, as we discern it). Simply consider the unfolding saga of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons in the remaining chapters of Genesis. Summarizing a few highlights from that narrative should illustrate my point. One is that the whole cast of characters is portrayed in all their faithfulness and foibles. Twice, fearing for his life, Abraham had tried to pass Sarah off as his sister rather than wife, with unfortunate consequences (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18; intriguingly, like father, like son: Isaac made the same false claim regarding Rebekah, nearly bringing about the same result in 26:6–11). We saw how Sarah schemed to produce an heir for Abraham through her maid Hagar, yet turned on her when Ishmael was born (16:3–6 and 21:8–13).

Isaac, Jacob, and His Sons

When Abraham and Sarah later seek a wife for Isaac, the search is guided not just by family connections but by the divine hand (Gen. 24:1–27). Rebekah, like Sarah, is at first barren. Yet following Isaac’s prayer, she conceives—although the fruit of their union is contentious even before the twins Esau and Jacob are born (25:21–26). It does not help matters that parental favoritism further pits the two against each other (25:27–28). Jacob takes advantage of Esau in a weak moment, gaining the latter’s birthright (25:29–34), while later on Rebekah schemes with Jacob to fool his father into giving him a blessing that Isaac thinks he is bestowing upon Esau (27:1–45). Esau is outraged and comforts himself by planning to kill Jacob, so Rebekah urges Jacob to flee to the ancestral home in Haran (27:41–45). On the way he has his dream of the heavenly ladder, and of the Lord’s promise of land and offspring, to which he responds by making his corresponding vow (28:12–22).

Jacob comes to stay with his kinsman Laban and falls in love with his younger daughter, Rachel, whom he wants to marry. Laban sets his terms (seven years of labor), but on the day of the wedding he tricks Jacob into

marrying his older daughter, Leah. When Jacob complains, Laban has him work another seven years to earn Rachel's hand in marriage (Gen. 29:9–30). Not surprisingly, a degree of rivalry develops between the two women, and eventually between their sons. At last the Lord tells Jacob to return to his father's home in Canaan (31:3). But he is understandably anxious about how he will be received, so he prays for God's deliverance while also sending ahead many gifts in hopes of appeasing Esau's anger. It is on this journey that Jacob encounters the mysterious man with whom he wrestles until daybreak, gaining a divine blessing and a new name: Israel (32:22–31). When he sees Esau approaching with a company of four hundred men, he fears the worst but is stunned when Esau receives him warmly, and the two weep for joy (33:1–4). Jacob eventually settles in Canaan, and the story shifts its focus to the next generation (37:1–2a).

The tale of Jacob's twelve sons then unfolds in all its engaging and telling detail. On the one hand, it is a masterpiece of storytelling, with entertaining plot twists, a colorful cast of characters, and an unexpected protagonist: the simultaneously naïve and arrogant younger son Joseph. But on the other, it is a story of spiritual pilgrimage and growth, as well as the subtleties of God's providential care. The dramatic tension is established at the very outset. Joseph is his father's favorite (exemplified by his receiving the "coat of many colors"), who has vivid dreams of lording it over his brothers. This does not sit well with most of those brothers, who conspire to kill him. Reuben, the eldest son, persuades the others not to murder him outright, and Joseph is instead sold into slavery and taken to Egypt, where he is bought by Potiphar, an officer of the pharaoh (Gen. 37:2–36).

Joseph in Egypt

Now the Lord is "with Joseph" and causes all that he does "to prosper in his hands" (Gen. 39:2–3), which leads Potiphar to make him overseer of his household. Yet this good fortune is soon undone by Potiphar's wife, who, her sexual advances having been rebuffed by Joseph, angrily denounces him as having made sexual advances on her. As a result, Potiphar throws him in prison (39:7–20). Yet the Lord shows steadfast love toward Joseph, giving him favor in the eyes of his jailer, who puts him in charge of caring for the other prisoners (39:21–23). Sometime later, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker are jailed, and Joseph is charged with caring for them as well. One night each of them has a dream, and they are troubled that they cannot understand the dreams' respective meanings. Joseph asks each to recount his dream so that he might interpret them. He tells the cupbearer that his dream indicates that

in three days' time he will be restored to his former position. Joseph asks only that when that happens, the cupbearer put in a good word for him with Pharaoh. This happy interpretation heartens the baker. But when Joseph explains the baker's dream, it is to say that in three days' time the baker will be executed. Each interpretation comes to pass as Joseph has said, yet the cupbearer forgets him (40:1–23).

Has God also forgotten Joseph? Has he forgotten the covenantal pledges he had made to his forebears? Or will he demonstrate his faithfulness in ways that his partners simply do not anticipate? Two years pass and Pharaoh himself has disturbing dreams, which none of the magicians or wise men of Egypt can interpret. Only at this point does Pharaoh's cupbearer remember the promise he made to Joseph. So Joseph is called into Pharaoh's presence, and Pharaoh asks him to interpret his dream. Joseph clarifies that it is not he but God who can disclose the meaning (Gen. 41:16) and, upon hearing the dreams, that it is God actually revealing to Pharaoh what he is about to do (41:25). Joseph then declares that the two dreams (one of seven fat cows being consumed by seven lean ones, and another of seven ears of grain being consumed by seven thin and blighted ones) are in fact the same: they portend the coming of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Joseph encourages Pharaoh to appoint someone "discerning and wise" to oversee storing up a portion of the bountiful harvests to prepare for the lean years to come—and Pharaoh gives this role to Joseph (41:33–45). This interaction is indeed telling. Joseph says only that Pharaoh should appoint "someone"; he does not promote himself. The self-important Joseph we met at the outset of the story has apparently been humbled by what he has endured. Yet then Pharaoh himself identifies Joseph as the one through whom the spirit of God has been working, thereby making him the one discerning and wise enough to undertake what needs to be done. When the seven years of plenty end, famine extends from Egypt throughout the region. Yet due to Joseph's diligent preparation, grain is available for sale to Egyptian and foreigner alike (41:56–57).

When Jacob learns that food is available, he sends ten of Joseph's brothers (holding back the youngest, Benjamin) to buy grain. They do not recognize Joseph when they appear before him, but he knows them and—perhaps not surprisingly—treats them harshly, accusing them of spying and imprisoning them for three days (Gen. 42:1–17). But Joseph relents, saying he will test them by holding one brother hostage, sending the rest back with food, and requiring them to return with Benjamin. The brothers agree to these terms, believing it is a penalty for what they did to Joseph—still not recognizing that he is the one before them and that he can understand everything they

say. He gives them grain and, secretly returning their payment to their bags, sends them on their way (42:18–25). At their first stop, they are stunned and frightened to see the money, presumably because they worry that the Egyptians will think that they have somehow stolen it back.

Eventually that food runs out, and Jacob tells them to go to Egypt once more. The brothers reluctantly set out, bringing Benjamin with them, as well as presents, double the money, and a willingness to explain all that had happened in hopes of gaining mercy. Joseph still does not reveal himself, but he receives them with hospitality, inquiring after their father. When he sees his brother Benjamin, he hurries from the room, lest his ruse be known because he is overcome with emotion. Washing his face and returning, Joseph commands the feast to begin—and the brothers are amazed (Gen. 43:1–34). When the meal is complete, Joseph orders his steward to fill the brothers' sacks with grain and secretly to place his own silver cup in Benjamin's sack. He will test them one more time. When they are a short way off on their return journey, Joseph sends the steward to accuse them of theft and ingratitude. They protest their innocence, but to their horror, when the bags are opened, the cup is found in Benjamin's. They return to Joseph and fall to the ground before him. As a spokesman for them all, Judah confesses: "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found" (44:16). Joseph insists that only Benjamin need stay, but Judah responds that that cannot be because it would break their father's heart. He then relates the details of the vow he made to Jacob and asks that he become a slave in place of Benjamin (44:18–34). At this, Joseph can no longer contain himself, and he reveals his identity to his brothers, saying:

And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Make haste and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry; you shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have; and there I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come; lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty." (Gen. 45:5–11 RSV)

So the brothers return, laden with food and gifts, to tell Jacob the good news. Initially, their father does not believe them, but the gifts and the wagons for the return journey convince him (Gen. 45:21–28). Thus, Jacob, his sons, and their extended families all travel to Egypt, to the land of Goshen, where Jacob and Joseph are reunited and the families settle (46:28–30). Matters seem to have resolved themselves. Yet Joseph’s brothers worry that he may still hold a grudge against them, and when Jacob finally dies, they are concerned he may now exact retribution. So they approach him, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died, ‘Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants’” (50:16–18 RSV). Joseph’s response to his brothers, anticipated in the long citation from Genesis 45 just quoted, makes an astonishing theological claim: “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (50:19–20 RSV).

God Will Be Faithful and Work Out His Purposes

These words are astonishing not just because they bring comfort to Joseph’s brothers and bring this particular story to a close. They also summarize the pattern of God’s providence throughout the whole book of Genesis and thereby establish that pattern as that of God’s providential activity throughout the remainder of the Scriptures. God will not abandon individuals but remains steadfast—while also employing them to serve his larger purposes. And those larger purposes include his care for his covenantal family, working through their actions and loyalties—and sometimes working in spite of those actions and loyalties. Consider the comments and general conclusion that John Calvin draws regarding Joseph’s words:

He skillfully distinguishes between the wicked counsels of men, and the admirable justice of God, by so ascribing the government of all things to God, as to preserve the divine administration free from contracting any stain from the vices of men. The selling of Joseph was a crime detestable for its cruelty and perfidy; yet he was not sold except by the decree of heaven. For neither did God merely remain at rest, and by conniving for a time, let loose the reins of human malice, in order that afterwards he might make use of this occasion; but, at his own will, he appointed the order of acting which he intended to be fixed and certain. Thus we may say with truth and propriety, that Joseph was sold by

the wicked consent of his brethren, and by the secret providence of God. Yet it was not a work common to both, in such a sense that God sanctioned anything connected with or relating to their wicked cupidity: because while they are contriving the destruction of their brother, God is effecting their deliverance from on high. Whence also we conclude, that there are various methods of governing the world. This truly must be generally agreed, that nothing is done without his will; because he both governs the counsels of men, and sways their wills and turns their efforts at his pleasure, and regulates all events: but if men undertake anything right and just, he so actuates and moves them inwardly by his Spirit, that whatever is good in them, may justly be said to be received from him: but if Satan and ungodly men rage, he acts by their hands in such an inexpressible manner, that the wickedness of the deed belongs to them, and the blame of it is imputed to them. For they are not induced to sin, as the faithful are to act aright, by the impulse of the Spirit, but they are the authors of their own evil, and follow Satan as their leader. Thus we see that the justice of God shines brightly in the midst of the darkness of our iniquity. . . . So that whatever poison Satan produces, God turns it into medicine for his elect.²³

Recall how I described sin as a fundamental orientation away from God, an alienation that disorders or severs the communion with God that he originally intended for us. In that sense, sin alienates us not just from God but from one another, and therefore from our own truest and most authentic selves. Moreover, this sin consists not simply of those acts that we individually do; rather, it is an inherited existential condition, an unavoidable social reality. Nevertheless, when we act out of it, whether individually or collectively, we are responsible—for otherwise we could not take ourselves or others seriously as moral agents. Taken at face value, it seems like a tragic paradox, an absurd and unfair catch-22. Yet we are not left to our own devices in trying to escape the conundrum: if we trust that God does indeed still act even in the midst of human evil, if we open ourselves to the leading of God’s Spirit, there is a way out. Joseph has matured, as have his brothers, and they have been reconciled and made aware of deeper currents bearing them along. His words to his brothers are spoken in hindsight, as he looks back over what has happened and acknowledges this greater perspective. But placed here in Scripture, among the last verses of the *first* book, they are also words of foresight and promise, anticipating events to come—not for Joseph and his brothers, but for those reading and hearing these words in their own time of sojourning.

And thus Genesis, as the book of “beginnings,” may conclude: the stage has been set, the personality of the main characters described, the providential and

23. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 487–88.

saving acts of God—along with the habitual waywardness of humanity—have been established, and the general trajectory of the whole story foreshadowed. Now the rest of the story may unfold. And in contrast to other origin stories or assumptions about human nature,²⁴ in the telling of this story the Bible offers a more humane and perceptive portrayal of our existence when it presents a story of generational connections, of personal and communal rhythms and continuities, and of certain recurring patterns and types. We are indeed aimed toward something new. But the new arrives in fits and starts, and it doesn't simply replace the old as much as it brings it along, building upon and transforming it. This is a story with twists and turns, with dead ends and new beginnings. Yet the fundamental premise has been established: whatever happens, God intends ultimately to bring it to the good. God will, in his own time and in his own way, shepherd his covenant people (and with them the whole of creation) to that final destination he has had in mind from the beginning.

24. See the discussion above regarding creation myths from other cultures claiming different origins for different tribes (p. 7) and the Enlightenment's notion of the *tabula rasa* (p. 18).