

world as it was intended to be. The existence of human sin, evil, and death are themselves tokens of the extent of the departure of the created order from its intended pattern. For this reason, most Christian reflections on redemption include the idea of some kind of restoration of creation to its original integrity, in order that God's intentions for it might find fulfillment. The Christian doctrine of salvation sets out some aspects of this theme, and we shall return to discuss it further later on (pp. 92–101).

The Christian Understanding of Humanity

"What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?" (Psalm 8: 4). From the beginning of history, people have wondered about their place in the greater scheme of things. Why are we here? What is our destiny? What is the meaning of human existence? The doctrine of creation offers the beginnings of an answer. It helps us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the world in which we find ourselves placed.

The Christian understanding of God's creation is that humanity is part of it. Yet, although humanity is part of the created order, this does not mean that people are indistinguishable from the remainder of creation. Human beings have been set a little lower than the angels and have been "crowned with glory and honor" (Psalm 8: 5). Men and women are created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1: 27). In what follows we shall explore this idea further.

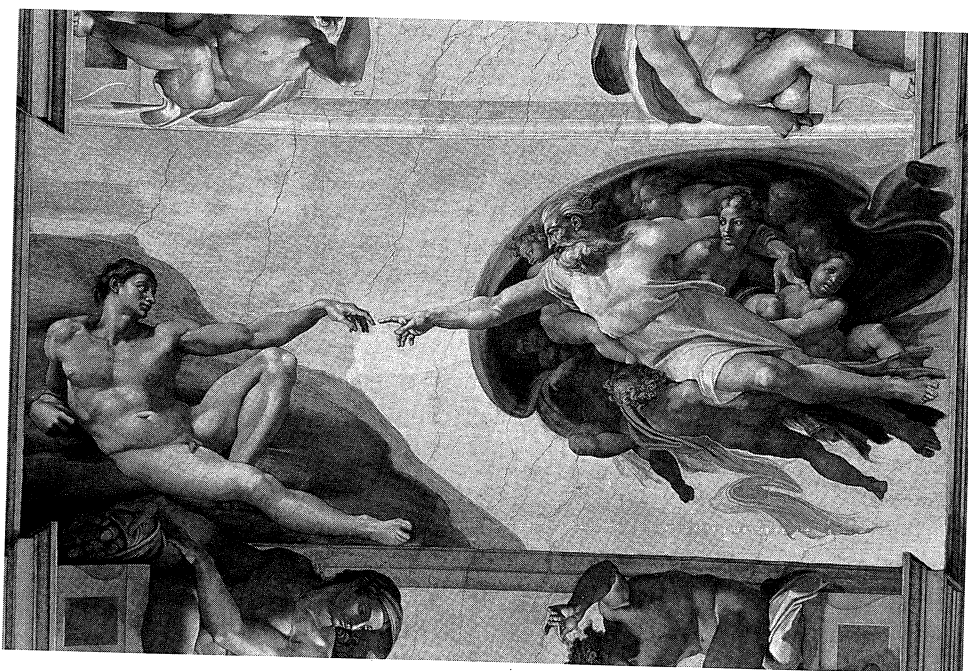


Figure 3.3 Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* (1511–1512) from the Sistine Chapel, Rome. Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564). Fresco, 280 × 570 cm. Rome, Vatican, Cappella Sistina (Sistine Chapel), 4th image. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.

Humanity and the "image of God"

The brief yet deeply significant phrase "image of God" opens the way to a right understanding of human nature and of the overall place of humanity within the created order. Although humanity is not divine, it possesses a relationship with God that is different from that of other creatures. Humanity bears the image of God. For some, this is a statement of the privileged position of humanity within creation. Yet, for most Christian thinkers, it is above all an affirmation of responsibility and accountability toward the world in which we live.

So how are we to understand this relationship with God? How can we visualize it? What does it mean to speak of "being made in the image of God"? A number of models have been developed within Christian theology, of which we may note three.

First, the "image of God" can be seen as expressing the authority of God over humanity. In the ancient Near East monarchs would often display images of themselves as an assertion of their power in a region (see, for example, the golden statue of Nebuchadnezzar, described in Daniel 3: 1–7). To be created in the "image of God" could be understood there as being owned by God or as being accountable to God.

This idea seems to be reflected in an incident in the ministry of Jesus Christ (Luke 20: 22–25). Challenged as to whether it was right for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman authorities, Jesus requested that a coin be brought to him. He asked: "Whose image and title does it bear?" Those standing around replied that it was Caesar's. Christ then tells the crowd to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. While some might take this to be an evasion of the question, it is actually a challenge to those who bear God's image – that is, to humanity – to dedicate themselves to God.

Second, the idea of the "image of God" can be taken to refer to some kind of correspondence between human reason and the rationality of God as creator. On this understanding of things, there is an intrinsic resonance between the structures of the world and human thought. This approach is set out with particular clarity in Augustine of Hippo's major theological writing *On the Trinity*:

The image of the creator is to be found in the rational or intellectual soul of humanity ... [The human soul] has been created according to the image of God in order that it may use reason and intellect in order to apprehend and behold God.

For Augustine, humanity is created with the intellectual resources that allow people to find God by reflecting on the creation.

A third approach suggests that being made in the "image of God" affirms a human capacity to relate to God. On this understanding, to be created in the "image of God" is to possess the potential to enter into a relationship with God. The term "image" here expresses the idea that God has created humanity with a specific goal – namely in order for it to relate to God. Humanity is thus meant to exist in a relationship with its creator and redeemer. Augustine expressed this idea in a famous prayer: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you."

Blaise Pascal argued that the human experience of emptiness and yearning is both a reflection of the absence of such a relationship and a pointer to the true destiny of humanity. It illuminates human nature and discloses its ultimate goal – which, for Pascal, is God.

What else does this longing and helplessness show us, other than that there was once in each person a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?

Nothing and no one other than God is able to fill this “abyss” – a profound, God-shaped gap within human nature, implanted by God as a means of drawing people back to him.

This approach was developed further in the twentieth century by C. S. Lewis. Following Pascal, Lewis argues that there is a God-shaped gap within humanity that only God can fill. And in the absence of God people experience a deep sense of longing – a longing that is really for God, but is misunderstood as a longing for things within the world. And these things can never satisfy. If humanity is made for God, and God alone, then there is nothing else that will ultimately satisfy it. And, as Lewis argued, this God-given sense of longing provided a key to answering the great questions of life with which humanity has wrestled.

Yet the Christian understanding of human nature is not totally determined by the idea of being made in the image of God. Important though this idea may be, it needs to be supplemented with the idea of sin.

Humanity, the fall, and sin

For Christianity, humanity is sinful – that is, alienated from God; and, as a result of this fundamental disruption of its identity, it is alienated from society, from itself, and from the environment. What is sin? Although in everyday language the word “sin” means something like a “moral failing” or an “immoral act,” the term has a more precise theological meaning. The fundamental sense of “sin” is something that separates humanity from God. Salvation is the breaking down of the barrier of separation between humanity and God on account of Christ.

Sin is thus the antithesis of salvation. It is quite simple to develop a list of fundamental New Testament concepts related to salvation and to link them to corresponding concepts related to sin. Some examples will help make this point.

Sin	Salvation
Alienation	Reconciliation
Captivity	Liberation
Guilt	Forgiveness
Condemnation	Vindication
Illness	Healing
Being lost	Being found

We shall explore some of these themes further, when we come to look at the Christian understanding of salvation later in this chapter (pp. 92–101).

Two narratives from the book of Genesis are often cited as illustrating some Christian insights into the profound contradictions within human nature – namely eating the fruit of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and the construction of the Tower of Babel. The first of these Genesis narratives relates how Adam and Eve were placed in the garden of paradise and given complete freedom to eat of all its trees – except one (Genesis 2: 15–17). This limitation on their freedom proves too much for them. If they were to eat the fruit of

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would become like God himself, determining what is good and what is evil (Genesis 3: 1–5). We long for autonomy; we do not want to be accountable to anyone. As the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky pointed out in his novel *The Devils* (1871–1872), if there is no God, people are able to do as they please. This was one of the great themes of the golden age of atheism, which began with the French Revolution in 1789.

Much the same theme is found in the second Genesis narrative – the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1–9). Karl Barth (1886–1968), one of the twentieth century’s greatest Christian writers, saw in this narrative an illustration of one aspect of sinful human nature: the desire to assert human authority and power in the face of God. Barth suggested that the Tower of Babel could be interpreted as a symbol of our human longing to be able to have knowledge of God on our own terms. Yet this desire for human control contained within itself the seeds of its own negation. Like many, Barth was traumatized by the catastrophe of World War I, which discredited the optimistic progressivism of the Age of Reason. When humans take charge, Barth noted, they seem to mess things up.

Over the years, Christian thinkers have developed two fundamental images to help make sense of this puzzling human predicament: defection and deflection. The first is more characteristic of the Latin-speaking western church; the second, of the Greek-speaking eastern church.

The western view is found in the writings of Augustine of Hippo. For Augustine, humanity has defected from its true calling. Instead of using their God-given freedom to love God, human beings used it to advance their own self-centered agendas. As a result, they are now caught in a trap of their own making. Augustine argues that they are unable to break free from their entanglement with sin. Held captive by in-dwelling sin, human beings prove unable to do the good that they would like to do; instead they do the bad things they do not want to do (see Romans 7: 17–25). For Augustine, the freedom to love that ought to have led to fellowship with God – as Adam and Eve walked with God in the garden of Eden – led instead to self-love and to a desertion of God for the lesser good.

Augustine uses a series of images to illuminate how humanity has become trapped by sin in this way. It is like becoming ill and being unable to find a cure. It is like having fallen into a deep pit and being unable to get out. The essential point he wants to make is that, once sin – which he conceives of as an active force in human lives – has taken hold of people, they are unable to break free from its grasp. To use a modern analogy, it is like being addicted to heroin and unable to break the habit. Only God is able to heal this illness and to break the bonds that imprison humanity.

The eastern view can be found in the second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons, who argued that humanity has been deflected from its true path by sin. Humanity has lost its way and needs to be helped back onto the right road. Irenaeus tends to see humanity as



Figure 3.4 Karl Barth (1886–1968). Source: Ullstein Bild/AKG Images.

weak and easily misled. Humans were created as mere infants, not as mature beings, and they must learn and grow. Asked why God did not create humanity already endowed with perfection, Irenaeus replied that they were simply not ready to cope with it. "A mother is able to offer food to an infant, but the infant is not yet able to receive food unsuited to its age."

This way of thinking remains characteristic of churches that trace their roots back to the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Mediterranean. Eastern and Russian Orthodoxy, for example, do not follow the western church in speaking of a "fall" but tend to think more in terms of a "wrong turn" or failure, which can be corrected through God's grace.

Yet, despite their differences, much the same insight lies beneath these two different ways of thinking about the human situation. On the Christian understanding of things, both eastern and western, human nature was intended to be the height of God's creation, but is now in need of radical remodeling and internal renewal. Like a once great palace fit for a king, it has fallen into disrepair and decay. Yet the situation can be redeemed. God's living presence within human nature could bring about the renewal, restoration, and repristination of what is now languishing in sin and death. If God were to enter into the human situation, the latter could be transformed from within. We can see here the prefiguring of a doctrine of the incarnation – the idea that God entered into our world and our history as one of us, in order to take us to heaven.

And this brings us to what many see as the central theme of Christian belief: the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth as the savior and redeemer of fallen humanity.

Jesus of Nazareth

Jesus of Nazareth is the central figure of the Christian faith. Christians have always insisted that there was something special, something qualitatively different about Jesus, which sets him apart from other religious teachers or thinkers. But what exactly is it that is special about him? This question is addressed in the area of Christian theology traditionally known as Christology. If theology can be understood as trying to make sense of God, then Christology is about trying to make sense of Jesus Christ.

The creeds insist that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical person, who lived and died. Jesus was a first-century Jew who lived in Palestine in the reign of Tiberius Caesar and was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea from AD 26 to 36. As we saw earlier (p. 1), the Roman historian Tacitus refers to Christians deriving their name from "Christ, who was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius." The Christian faith certainly holds that Jesus existed as a real historical figure and that he was crucified.

Yet the Christian faith is not limited to the mere facts that Jesus lived in the Roman province of Judaea and was crucified by the Roman authorities. The interpretation of his life and death is of critical importance. The creeds weave together the leading themes of the New Testament's interpretation of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian doctrine can be seen as the outcome of an extended and ongoing process of reflection on these biblical ideas and themes, including:

- 1 the terms that the New Testament uses to refer to Jesus;
- 2 the impact that Jesus made upon people during his ministry – for example, through his healing;
- 3 the resurrection, which New Testament writers interpret as an endorsement and validation of Jesus' exalted status in regard to God. Thus, for Paul, the resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1: 3–4);
- 4 what Jesus is understood to have achieved, which is taken to be directly related to his identity. There is a close link between the Christian understanding of the person of Christ and the work of Christ. In other words, discussion of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is interlocked with discussion of his achievement, and hence with his wider significance. We shall explore this issue further when reflecting on salvation in the following section.

In the present section we shall consider how Christian theology wove these various insights into a coherent understanding of the person of Christ, culminating in the concept of incarnation. As background to the definitive statement of this idea at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), we shall explore some aspects of the process of reflection on the New Testament within the earlier Christian tradition.

Early Christian approaches to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth

As we have seen from our analysis of the view of Jesus found in the New Testament (pp. 21–25), the first Christians believed that they were confronted with something so novel in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that they were obliged to employ a whole range of images, terms, and ideas to describe it. There was simply no single term or concept available that could capture the richness and profundity of their impressions and experience of Jesus. They were forced to use a whole variety of terms – many borrowed from Judaism – to illuminate the different aspects of their understanding of him. Taken together, these terms combined to build up an overall picture of Jesus.

At times, early Christian writers drew on ideas or concepts whose origins lay outside Judaism to try and build up this picture. For example, it is often thought that the opening section of John's gospel (John 1: 1–18), with its distinctive emphasis on the "Word" (Greek *logos*), is trying to explain how Jesus occupies the same place in the Christian understanding of the world as the idea of the *Logos* in secular Greek philosophy.

Yet this does not mean that Christians invented their understanding of Jesus' significance just because they happened to read a few textbooks of Stoic philosophy. Rather, they noticed an analogy or a parallel and saw the obvious advantages in using it to express something they already knew about. This use also went some way to make Christianity more understandable to an educated Greek audience. Even at this early stage in the Christian tradition, we can identify a principled determination to make the gospel both intelligible and accessible to those outside the church. The gospel was thus expressed using ideas and concepts that helped to bring out its central themes and to make them understandable to non-believers.

Two early viewpoints were quickly rejected as heretical. Ebionitism, a primarily Jewish sect that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era, regarded Jesus as an ordinary

human being, the human son of Mary and Joseph. This weak Christology soon came to be regarded as totally inadequate and passed into oblivion. More significant was the diametrically opposed view, which came to be known as docetism, from the Greek verb *dokein* (to "seem" or "appear"). This approach – which is probably best regarded as a tendency within theology rather than a definite theological position – argued that Christ was totally divine, and that his humanity was merely an appearance. The sufferings of Christ are thus treated as apparent rather than real. Docetism held a particular attraction for the gnostic writers of the second century, during which period it reached its zenith. By this time, however, other viewpoints were in the process of emerging, and they would eventually eclipse the docetic tendency.

The first period in the development of Christology centered on confirming and clarifying the best way of understanding the divinity of Jesus. That Jesus was human appeared to be something of a truism to most early patristic writers. What required explanation about Jesus concerned the manner in which he differed from other human beings rather than the ways in which he was similar to them. What was different about him? What was additionally true about him, that was true of no other person?

One debate proved to be of decisive importance in catalyzing the growing consensus within the Christian community about the best manner of conceptualizing the identity of Jesus of Nazareth: the Arian controversy of the fourth century.

The Arian controversy and the incarnation

One of the greatest challenges faced by the early church was the weaving together of the threads of the New Testament's testimonial to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth into a coherent theological tapestry. Christians gradually came to realize that no existing analogy or model was good enough to meet their needs in expressing the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The concept of the incarnation began to emerge as one of central importance to the church's understanding of Jesus Christ.

While the idea was developed in slightly different ways by different writers, their core theme was that of God entering into history and taking on human nature in Jesus of Nazareth. This idea caused considerable philosophical difficulties for the prevailing schools of Hellenistic philosophy. How, many asked, could an immutable God enter into history?

Arius (c. 270–336), a priest in one of the larger churches of the great Egyptian city of Alexandria, argued that the best way of making Christianity's ideas about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth more attractive and credible to Hellenistic culture was to declare that he was not divine in any meaningful sense of the term. He was "first among the creatures" – that is, preeminent in rank, yet unquestionably a creature rather than a divine being. Now, Arius was careful to emphasize that the Son is not identical with other creatures; he argued that there is a clear distinction of rank between the Son and other human beings. Yet the basic idea was as clear as it was simple: Jesus of Nazareth was a human being and could not be regarded as divine in any meaningful way.

Arius' most important critic was Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 293–373). To Athanasius it seemed that Arius had destroyed the internal coherence of the Christian faith, rupturing the close connection between Christian belief and worship. Athanasius insisted that only

God can save. God, and God alone, can break the power of sin and bring humanity to eternal life. The fundamental characteristic of human nature is that it requires to be redeemed. No creature can save another creature. If Christ is not God, he is part of the problem, not its solution. The New Testament and the Christian liturgical tradition alike regarded Jesus Christ as the savior. Yet, as Athanasius emphasized, only God can save. So how are we to make sense of this? How can Jesus of Nazareth be our savior, if he is not divine? How can he save, if he is understood in a way that declares he is *not* able to save?

The only possible solution, Athanasius argued, was to accept that Jesus of Nazareth is none other than God incarnate. Salvation, for Athanasius, involves divine intervention, which he saw affirmed in a critically important biblical text: "the Word became flesh" (John 1: 14). God entered into the human situation, in order to change it.

In the end, the approach advocated by Athanasius triumphed, although it was some time before it achieved full acceptance in the Chalcedonian definition of the incarnation – called so because it received definitive formulation at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. In what follows we shall consider this landmark in more detail.

The incarnation: The Chalcedonian definition

The Christian doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ is often discussed in terms of "incarnation." "Incarnation" is a difficult yet important word, deriving from the Latin term for "flesh" and setting out the basic Christian belief that Jesus Christ is both divine and human. The doctrine of the incarnation declares that Jesus of Nazareth acts as God and for God in human history. Jesus is understood to be enabled and authorized to disclose God and to make promises in God's name.

The doctrine of the incarnation makes explicit what is implicit in the biblical affirmation that the "word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1: 14). The Greek word translated here as "lived" more accurately means "pitched his tent." As Christians travel on the journey of faith, they find a new tent pitched in their midst. God himself has come to dwell among them. The doctrine of the incarnation thus solidifies one of the great themes of the Christian faith: that God truly cares for humanity – not as a passive distant observer, but as an active fellow traveler on the road of human life.

The classic Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is often summarized in the "doctrine of the two natures" – that is, the view that Jesus is perfectly divine and perfectly human – which was definitively stated by the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. This doctrine laid down a controlling principle for classical Christology that has been accepted as definitive within orthodox Christian theology ever since. Chalcedon simply stated definitively what the first five centuries of Christian reflection on the New Testament had already established by using a variety of ways of speaking and thinking. The section of the Nicene Creed dealing with the identity of Jesus – which was modified and authorized by the Council of Chalcedon – reads like this:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

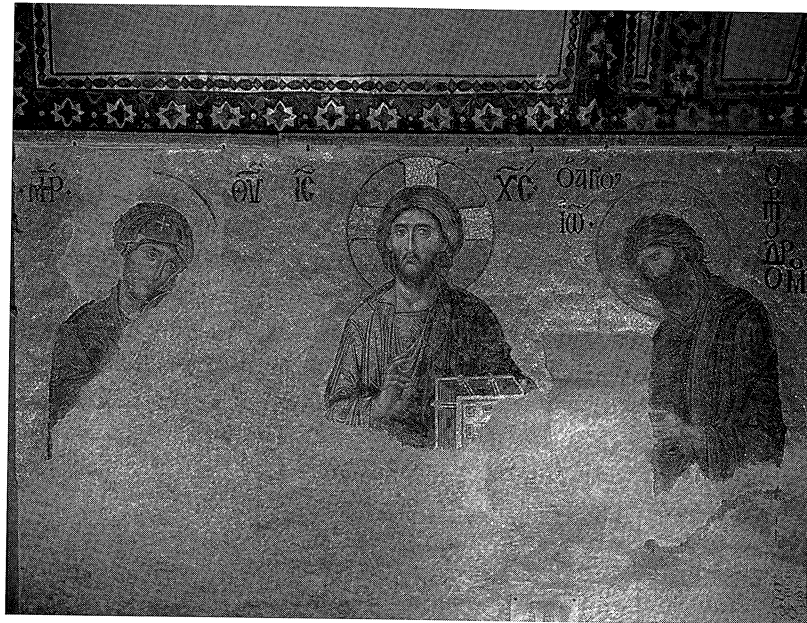


Figure 3.5 Mosaic depicting Jesus Christ, in the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, c. 1260. Istanbul/Constantinople (Turkey), Hagia Sophia, North Gallery. *Deesis* (Christ with Mary and John the Baptist). Mosaic, Byzantine, c. 1260. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.

The point being made here is that Jesus of Nazareth is to be understood as both God and a human being. To make this point absolutely clear, the Council of Chalcedon used a technical term, already well established by this time. This is the Greek term *homoousios*, which is usually translated into English as “of one substance” or “of one being.” Although this term was not itself biblical, it was widely regarded as expressing a thoroughly biblical insight. Jesus is “of one substance” with God, just as he is “of one substance” with humanity. In other words, Jesus is the same as God; it really is God who is encountered in Jesus, and not some messenger sent from God.

An important minority viewpoint must, however, be noted. The Council of Chalcedon did not succeed in establishing a consensus throughout the entire Christian world. A minority viewpoint emerged during the sixth century and is now generally known as monophysitism – literally, the view that there is “only one nature” (Greek *monos*, “one, single” and *phusis*, “nature”) in Christ. The nature in question is understood to be divine rather than human. The intricacies of this viewpoint lie beyond the scope of this volume; the reader should note that the view itself remains normative within most Christian churches of the eastern Mediterranean world, including the Coptic, Armenian, Syrian, and Abyssinian churches.

Jesus of Nazareth as mediator between God and humanity

As we noted earlier, the doctrine of the incarnation established that Jesus Christ was to be thought of as perfectly human and perfectly divine. Important though this idea may be, it is not easy to visualize. So what models or analogies may be helpful as we try to visualize the

place of Jesus of Nazareth on the Christian map of divine and human possibilities? In this section we shall explore one New Testament title for Christ that has been explored in some detail by Christian theologians – namely that of mediator: the idea that Jesus of Nazareth is a mediator between God and humanity at several points (Hebrews 9: 15; 1 Timothy 2: 5).

First, Jesus of Nazareth is able to mediate by transmitting knowledge of God to humanity. As someone who is both divine and human, Jesus can be thought of as a bridge or channel between God and humanity’s knowledge of God. Second, Jesus is able to mediate between God and humanity, to re-establish the relationship between them. What was broken by sin can be repaired by grace.

This point is developed by many Christian theologians. A good example is found in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). Jesus Christ mediates between God and humanity. In order to act as a mediator, Calvin argues, Jesus Christ must be both divine and human. Since it was impossible for humans to ascend to God on account of their sin, God chose to descend to humanity instead. “The Son of God became the Son of Man, and received what is ours in such a way that he transferred to us what is his, making that which is his by nature to become ours through grace.”

So what is mediated? Two complementary answers are given by the New Testament and by the long tradition of Christian theological engagement with Scripture: revelation and salvation. Christ mediates both knowledge of God and fellowship with God. This theme is expressed by many Christian writers, including Dorothy L. Sayers. She is perhaps best known for her crime novels, which featured Lord Peter Wimsey as an amateur aristocratic sleuth. However, she also developed a considerable interest in Christian theology, which is evident in works such as *The Mind of the Maker* and *Creed or Chaos?* In this second work Sayers argues that it is not good enough to agree that Jesus was a good teacher with some useful ideas, unless we have good reasons for asserting that there is something distinctive about Jesus that requires us to take those ideas with compelling seriousness. Hence, Sayers argues, the great questions of Christology are inevitable and must be addressed.

Having made this point, she then turns to consider the issue of mediation. Under what conditions is mediation between God and humanity possible? And in what way is Jesus capable of acting in his capacity as mediator? Her answer is that the “two natures” – in other words, the doctrine that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine – safeguard this idea.

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.

We now turn to consider an especially significant response to Jesus, which has a particularly important place in today’s world: that of Islam.

Islamic criticisms of the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth

The growing global importance of Islam makes the question of how Muslims view Jesus of increasing significance to Christianity. Islam acknowledges that Jesus was a prophet and a messenger of God. The name “Jesus” (Arabic *isa*) is used 25 times. In most cases, this name

is linked with the title "Son of Mary" (*ibn Mariam*); it is less frequently linked with that of Moses. Although the New Testament makes it clear that the name "Jesus" means "God saves" (Matthew 1.21), the Qu'ran offers no explanation of the name *isa*. The related term "Messiah" (*al masih*) is also used in the Qu'ran. Again, the rich Old Testament associations of this term as "God's anointed" do not seem to be understood. It is not clear why the Qu'ran should refer to Jesus as the "son of Mary." This title is used very rarely in the New Testament (Mark 6: 3). It is also unusual (but not unknown) in the Semitic world for any major figure to be named after his mother rather than father. The Qu'ran also refers to Jesus using quite elevated language. Thus he is described as the "word of God" and the "spirit of God," formulae that give him a place of honor within the Islamic understanding of the progression of revelation. This progression is held to reach its definitive climax in the revelation to Muhammad, which is committed to writing in the Qu'ran.

The Islamic view of the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus is somewhat complex. Although there are points where the Qu'ran refers to the death of Christ, indicating that it was in accord with the will of God, the precise manner and significance of his death remains unclear. One passage seems to teach that Jesus was neither killed by the Jews nor crucified by his enemies, "although it seemed so to them." Rather Jesus was translated to heaven, some other unnamed person taking his place on the cross. The phrase "it seemed so to them" would thus bear the sense of either "the Jews thought that Jesus died on the cross" or "the Jews thought that the person on the cross was Jesus."

Perhaps most significantly, the idea of the incarnation is completely unacceptable to Islam. The Christian belief that Christ is the Son of God is seen by Islamic writers as a reversion to some form of paganism, characterized by the idea of God having physical children. The distinctively Christian notion of what the phrase "son of God" entails appears not to have been fully grasped at the time of the composition of the Qu'ran. It therefore must be stressed, in this context too, that the orthodox Christian doctrine of Jesus as the "Son of God" in no way means that God physically fathered Jesus. Muslims generally regard this description as an instance of the heresy of *ittakhadha*, by which Jesus is acknowledged to be the physical Son of God. This is not a correct perception. The point of using the title "Son" is fundamentally relational: it is an affirmation of the unique status of Jesus in relation to God, and hence of the unique role of Jesus within the Christian tradition as a bearer of divine revelation and as the agent of divine salvation.

The Christian Understanding of Salvation

A central theme of the Christian message is that the human situation has in some way been transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This change is often described as "salvation." Although the word "salvation" has a very specific meaning, it is often used in a more general sense. To begin with, let us reflect on some of the analogies or images of salvation that are found in Paul's letters in the New Testament. These have proved deeply influential on Christian reflection on what some theologians call "the benefits of Christ" – in other words, on the difference that Jesus of Nazareth made to humanity through his life, death, and resurrection.

New Testament images of salvation

The term "salvation" does not necessarily have any specifically Christian reference. It can be used in a thoroughly secular manner. For example, it was common for Soviet writers, especially during the late 1920s, to speak of Lenin as the "savior" of the Russian people. Military coups in African states during the 1980s frequently resulted in the setting up of "councils of salvation," which would try to restore political and economic stability. Salvation can thus be a purely secular notion, concerned with political emancipation or the general human quest for liberation.

Even in the realm of religion, salvation is not a specifically Christian idea. Many – but, it must be stressed, not all – of the world's religions have concepts of salvation. They differ enormously, both in their understanding of how salvation is achieved and in the shape or form that salvation is supposed to take.

In turning to explore the Christian notion of salvation in more detail, we need to engage with two questions. First, there is the question of how "salvation" itself is to be construed. In what way is the Christian understanding of the nature of salvation distinctive? We shall consider some ways of thinking about salvation in the present section.

Second, there is the question of how salvation is possible, and in particular how it is grounded in the history of Jesus Christ. Or, to put this another way: What is the basis of salvation, according to Christian doctrine? Both these questions have been the subject of intense discussion throughout history, and in the next section we shall consider some themes that emerge from this discussion.

We begin by considering how salvation is to be understood. Throughout his letters in the New Testament, Paul uses a rich range of images to illuminate and clarify what benefits Christ secures for believers. He clearly assumes that his readers will be able to grasp what these analogies are meant to convey. In what follows we shall explore some of these images and try to appreciate their importance.

The first image is that of salvation itself. The term has a number of meanings, including release from danger, captivity, or some form of fatal illness. Notions such as "healing" and "liberation" can be seen as being encompassed into the sphere of this important Pauline term. Augustine of Hippo suggested that the church was like a hospital, in that it was full of people who were in the process of being healed. Paul sees salvation as having past (e.g., Romans 8: 24), present (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1: 18), and future (e.g., Romans 13: 11) dimensions. Thus the word "salvation" can refer to something that has already happened in the past, to something that is happening in the present, and to something that will happen in the future.

Many Christian preachers use narratives to make this point. One favorite is the response of a Salvation Army officer to a child who asked whether the officer was saved. The reply makes the point perfectly: "I have been saved from the guilt of sin. I am being saved from the power of sin. And I shall finally be saved from the presence of sin."

A second image of importance is that of adoption. At several points, Paul speaks of Christians as having been "adopted" into the family of God (Romans 8: 15, 23; Galatians 4: 5). It is widely thought that Paul is here drawing on a legal practice, common in Greco-Roman culture (yet, interestingly, not recognized in traditional Jewish law). According to many interpreters of Paul, to speak of "believers" having been adopted into the family of

God is to make the point that believers share the same inheritance rights as Jesus Christ, and hence will receive the glory that Christ achieved (although only after first sharing in his sufferings).

A third image is that of "justification." At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century (pp. 151–154), many Protestant writers came to place particular importance on the image of justification. Especially in those letters dealing with the relation of Christianity to Judaism (such as Galatians and Romans), Paul affirms that believers have been "justified through faith" (e.g., Romans 5: 1–2). This is widely held to involve a change in a believer's legal status in the sight of God and in his or her ultimate assurance of acquittal before God, despite his or her sinfulness. The noun "justification" and the verb "to justify" thus came to signify entering into a right relationship with God, or perhaps being made righteous in the sight of God.

A fourth image is that of redemption. This term primarily bears the sense of "securing someone's release through a payment." In the ancient world, which acted as the backdrop to Paul's thought, "redemption" could be used to refer to the liberation of prisoners of war or to securing liberty for those who had sold themselves into slavery, often to pay off a family debt. Paul's basic idea appears to be that the death of Christ secures for believers freedom from slavery to the law or to death, in order that they might become slaves of God instead (1 Corinthians 6: 20; 7: 23).

A fifth image is that of reconciliation – the restoration of a broken relationship. Paul speaks of God having "reconciled us to himself through Christ," and he declares that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5: 18–19). Paul uses the same word elsewhere in his writings to refer to the restoration of a fractured human relationship, asking husbands to be reconciled to their alienated wives. This strongly relational way of thinking about salvation is particularly accessible in modern western culture.

In more recent times, theologians and preachers have tried to translate these ideas into concepts that connect up easily with present cultural concerns. For example, some speak of salvation in terms of political liberation; others in terms of securing personal fulfillment. The basic theme, however, remains essentially the same: salvation is about God enabling humanity to become what it was really meant to be, despite its deflection and defection through sin (pp. 84–85).

We must now turn to the second of our questions about salvation. How are we to understand the manner in which the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth fit into God's transformation of the human situation? This field of Christian thought is often referred to as "theories of the atonement." In what follows we shall look at a number of ways in which Christians understand how Jesus is the ground for salvation. These are best seen as complementary perspectives on a complex subject, or multiple layers of a stratified reality. We begin by reflecting on the theme of the victory of Jesus of Nazareth over death and sin.

Christ the victor: The defeat of death and sin

"Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15: 57). The early church gloried in the triumph of Jesus of Nazareth upon the cross, and in

the victory he won over sin, death, and Satan. The gates of heaven had been thrown wide open through the conquest of Calvary. The powerful imagery of the triumphant Jesus rising from the dead and being installed as "ruler of all" (Greek *pantokrator*) seized the imagination of the Christian East. The cross was seen as the focal point of a famous battle, comparable to the great Homeric epics, in which the forces of good and evil engaged, the good emerging victorious.

The early church seems to have been rather more concerned to proclaim Christ's victory over the enemies of humanity than to speculate over precisely how it came about. Jesus' resurrection and his triumphant opening of the gates of heaven to believers was something to be proclaimed and celebrated rather than subjected to theological analysis.

The Roman cultural context of early Christianity suggested one way of thinking about such a triumph. The victory of Jesus over his enemies was depicted as being like the great triumphant processions of ancient Rome, marking the achievement of Rome's military leaders. In its classical form, the triumphal parade proceeded from the Campus Martius through the streets of Rome, finally ending up at the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline

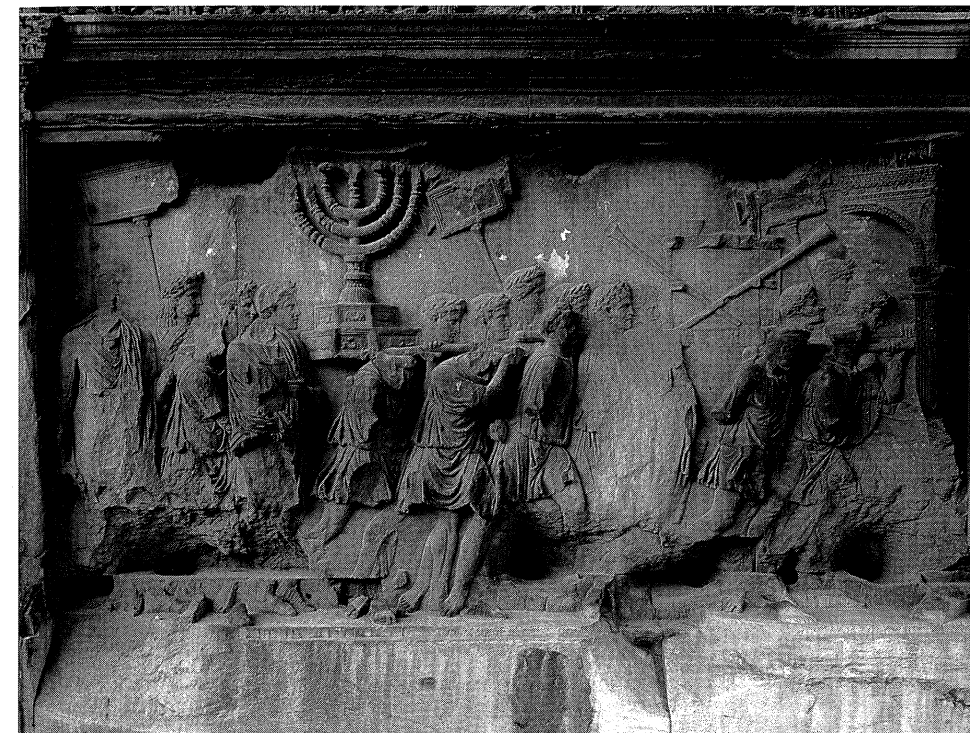


Figure 3.6 A triumphal procession in Rome celebrating Titus' victory over the Jews in AD 70; carved on the Arch of Titus, triumphal arch in the Forum Romanum erected in AD 81. The New Testament portrays Jesus of Nazareth as a triumphant victor over sin and death. Rome (Italy), the Arch of Titus, section of the left internal relief: Triumphal procession with the seven-armed candlestick from the Temple of Solomon. Source: Erich Lessing/AKG Images.

Hill. The parade was led by the triumphant general's soldiers, who often carried placards with slogans that described the general and his achievements, or showed maps of the territories he had conquered. Other soldiers led carts containing booty that would be turned over to Rome's treasury. A section of the parade included prisoners, often the leaders of the defeated cities or countries, bound in chains.

It was a small step for Christian writers to use this imagery as a way of portraying Jesus of Nazareth's triumph over his enemies – such as sin and death. This powerful symbolism was firmly grounded in the New Testament, which spoke of the victorious Jesus as “making captivity a captive” (Ephesians 4: 8). While this theme can be found in some Christian art of this early period, its most dramatic impact was upon the hymns of the period. One of them portrays Christ's triumphant procession and celebrates his defeat of his foes.

The royal banners forward go,
The cross shines forth in mystic glow;
Where he in flesh, our flesh Who made,
Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.

Christ the harrower of hell: Atonement as restoration

A further development of this theme of victory over death depicts Jesus of Nazareth as extending the triumph of the cross and resurrection to the netherworld. The dramatic and colorful medieval idea of “the harrowing of hell” holds that, after dying upon the cross, Jesus descended to hell and broke down its gates in order that the imprisoned souls might go free. The idea rests (rather tenuously, it has to be said) upon a biblical text (1 Peter 3: 18–22) that speaks of Jesus “preaching to the spirits in prison.”

The hymn “You Choirs of New Jerusalem,” written by Fulbert of Chartres (c. 970–1028), expresses this theme in two of its verses, picking up the theme of Christ as the “lion of Judah” (Revelation 5: 5) defeating Satan, the serpent (Genesis 3: 15):

For Judah's lion bursts his chains
Crushing the serpent's head;
And cries aloud through death's domain
To wake the imprisoned dead.

Devouring depths of hell their prey
At his command restore;
His ransomed hosts pursue their way
Where Jesus goes before.

The idea rapidly became established in popular English literature of the Middle Ages. One of the most important pieces of Christian literature of this period is *Piers the Plowman*, traditionally attributed to William Langland. In this poem the narrator tells of

how he falls asleep and dreams of Jesus of Nazareth throwing open the gates of hell and addressing the following words to Satan:

Here is my soul as a ransom for all these sinful souls, to redeem those that are worthy. They are mine; they came from me, and therefore I have the better claim on them. ... You, by falsehood and crime and against all justice, took away what was mine, in my own domain; I, in fairness, recover them by paying the ransom, and by no other means. What you got by guile is won back by grace. ... And as a tree caused Adam and all mankind to die, so my gallows-tree shall bring them back to life.

It is clear that this highly dramatic understanding of the way in which Christ threw open the gates of death and hell, allowing their imprisoned masses to escape and enter into the joys of heaven, made a potent appeal on the imagination of the readers of *Piers Plowman*.

Such is the power of this image that it lingers, often unrecognized, in later writings. A particularly striking example can be found in C. S. Lewis's children's tale *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The book tells the story of Narnia, a land discovered by accident by four children as they rummage around in an old wardrobe. In this work we encounter the White Witch, who keeps the land of Narnia covered in a perpetual wintry snow. As we read on, we realize that she rules Narnia not as a matter of right, but by stealth. The true ruler of the land is absent; in his absence, the witch subjects the land to oppression. In the midst of this land of winter stands the witch's castle, within which many of the original inhabitants have been imprisoned as stone statues.

As the narrative moves on, we discover that the rightful ruler of the land is Aslan, a lion. As Aslan advances into Narnia, winter gives way to spring and the snow begins to melt. The witch realizes that her power is starting to fade and moves to eliminate the threat posed to her by Aslan. Aslan surrenders himself to the forces of evil and allows them to do their worst with him – yet by so doing he disarms them. Lewis's description of the resurrection of Aslan is one of his more tender moments, evoking as it does the deep sense of sorrow so evident in the New Testament accounts of the burial of Christ and the joy of recognition of the reality of the resurrection. Lewis then describes how Aslan – the lion of Judah, who has burst his chains – breaks into the castle, breathes upon the statues, and restores them to life before leading the liberated army through the shattered gates of the once great fortress – to freedom. Hell has been harrowed, and its inhabitants liberated from its dreary shades.



Figure 3.7 The Harrowing of Hell, as depicted in Jean de Berry's *Petites Heures* (14th century). Harrowing of Hell, folio 166 from Jean de Berry's *Petites Heures*. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, BNF Lat 18104.

Christ the redeemer: Atonement as satisfaction

A third approach to the meaning of the death of Christ integrates a series of biblical passages that deal with notions of judgment and forgiveness. The understanding of the work of Christ outlined in the previous sections has enormous attractions, not least on account of its highly dramatic character. However, it also has some serious weaknesses. For the eleventh-century writer Anselm of Canterbury, two were of particular importance. In the first place, it failed to explain why God should wish to redeem us. And, in the second, it was of little value in making us understand how Jesus of Nazareth was involved in the process of redemption. Anselm felt that more explanation was required.

To meet this need, he developed an approach to the achievement of Jesus of Nazareth that stressed the fact that God redeemed humanity in a way that is consistent with the moral ordering of the creation, which reflects God's own nature. God cannot create the universe as an expression of his own will and nature and then violate its moral order by acting in a completely different way in the redemption of humanity. God must redeem humanity in a way that is consistent with his own nature and purposes. Redemption must in the first place be moral, and in the second place be seen to be moral. God cannot employ one standard of morality at one point and another later on. God is therefore under a self-imposed obligation to respect the moral order of the creation.

Having established this point, Anselm considers how redemption is possible. The basic dilemma can be summarized as follows. God cannot restore humanity to fellowship without first dealing with human sin. Sin is a disruption of the moral ordering of the universe. It represents the rebellion of the creation against its creator. It represents an insult and an offense to God. The situation must be "made right" before the fellowship between God and humanity can be restored. God must therefore "make good" the situation in a way that is consistent with both divine mercy and divine righteousness. Anselm thus introduces the concept of "satisfaction" – a payment or some other action that compensates for the offense of human sin. Once this satisfaction has been brought, the situation can revert to normal. But this satisfaction must first be achieved.

Yet human beings do not have the ability to bring this kind of satisfaction. It lies beyond their resources. They need to do it – but they cannot. Humanity ought to render satisfaction for its sins, but it is unable to. God is under no obligation to bring satisfaction – but God could do it, if that were appropriate. Therefore, Anselm argues, if God were to become a human being, the resulting God-person would have both the obligation (as a human being) and the ability (as God) to render the necessary satisfaction. Thus the incarnation brings a just solution of this dilemma, leading to the transformation of the human situation. The death of Jesus of Nazareth upon the cross demonstrates God's total opposition to sin, while at the same time providing the means by which sin could be really and truly forgiven and the way opened to a renewed fellowship between humanity and God.

The basic idea is that the value of the satisfaction thus offered had to be equivalent to the weight of human sin. Anselm argued that the Son of God became incarnate in order that he, as God incarnate, should both take on the human obligation to bring satisfaction and possess the divine ability to pay a satisfaction of the magnitude required for redemption.

This idea is faithfully reproduced by Mrs Cecil F. Alexander (1818–1895) in her famous nineteenth-century hymn "There Is a Green Hill Far Away":

There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in.

But how does the death of Jesus of Nazareth upon the cross affect us? In what way do we share in the benefits of his death and resurrection? Anselm felt that this point did not require discussion, and so he gave no guidance on the matter. Later Christian writers, however, felt that it needed to be addressed. Three main ways of understanding how believers relate to Christ in this respect may be noted.

- 1 *Participation* Through faith, believers participate in Jesus Christ. They are "in Christ," to use Paul's famous phrase. They are caught up in him and share in his risen life. As a result, they share in all the benefits won by Christ through his obedience upon the cross.
- 2 *Representation* Christ is the covenant representative of humanity. Through faith, we come to be within the covenant between God and humanity. All that Christ has won for us is available to us, on account of the covenant between God and his church. Christ, through his obedience upon the cross, represents God's covenant people and wins benefits for them as their representative. By coming to faith, individuals come to be within the covenant and thus participate in all its benefits won by Christ.
- 3 *Substitution* Jesus is here understood to be a substitute for believers. They ought to have been crucified on account of their sins; Jesus is crucified in their place. God thus allows Jesus to take human guilt upon himself, in order that his righteousness, won through obedience upon the cross, might become the believers' through faith.

The death of Christ as a perfect sacrifice

The New Testament draws on Old Testament imagery and expectations, in presenting the death of Jesus of Nazareth upon the cross as a sacrifice. This approach, which is especially associated with the letter to the Hebrews, interprets Christ's sacrificial offering as an effective and perfect sacrifice, which was able to accomplish what the sacrifices of the Old Testament were only able to intimate. Paul's use of the Greek term *hilastērion*, often translated as "mercy seat" (Romans 3: 25), is important here, as it is drawn from Old Testament sacrificial rituals related to the purging of sin.

This idea is developed subsequently within the Christian tradition. In order for humanity to be restored to God, the mediator must sacrifice himself; without this sacrifice, such restoration is simply impossible. Writing in the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria argues that Christ's sacrifice was superior in several respects to those required under the Old Covenant:

Christ offers a sacrifice which is trustworthy, of permanent effect, and which is unailing in its nature. The sacrifices which were offered according to the Law were not trustworthy, since they

had to be offered every day, and were again in need of purification. In contrast, the Saviour's sacrifice was offered once only, and was accomplished in its entirety, and can thus be relied upon permanently.

This point was developed further in Athanasius' *Festal Letters*, written annually to celebrate the feast of Easter. In these letters Athanasius develops the New Testament idea that there is an important analogy between the death of Christ on the cross and the sacrifice of a lamb during the Jewish festival of the Passover, which commemorates Israel's deliverance from Egypt:

[Christ], being truly of God the Father, became incarnate for our sakes, so that he might offer himself to the Father in our place, and redeem us through his offering and sacrifice. . . . This is he who, in former times, was sacrificed as a lamb, having been foreshadowed in that lamb. But afterwards, he was slain for us. "For Christ, our passover, is sacrificed".

(1 Corinthians 5: 7)

Augustine of Hippo brought a new clarity to the whole discussion of the nature of Christ's sacrifice through his crisp and highly influential definition of a sacrifice, set out in *City of God*: "A true sacrifice is offered in every action which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship." On the basis of this definition, Augustine has no difficulties in speaking of Christ's death as a sacrifice: "By his death, which is indeed the one and most true sacrifice offered for us, he purged, abolished, and extinguished whatever guilt there was by which the principalities and powers lawfully detained us to pay the penalty." In this sacrifice Christ was both victim and priest; he offered himself up as a sacrifice: "He offered sacrifice for our sins. And where did he find that offering, the pure victim that he would offer? He offered himself, in that he could find no other."

These themes remain important to Christians, as can be seen from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), which sets them out as follows:

After agreeing to baptize [Jesus of Nazareth] along with the sinners, John the Baptist looked at Jesus and pointed him out as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." By doing so, he reveals that Jesus is at the same time the suffering Servant who silently allows himself to be led to the slaughter and who bears the sin of the multitudes, and also the Paschal Lamb, the symbol of Israel's redemption at the first Passover. Christ's whole life expresses his mission: "to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Christ the lover: Atonement and the enkindling of love

A leading theme of the New Testament's understanding of the death of Christ is that this act demonstrates the love of God for humanity and elicits a matching love in response. This theme is developed in Christian theology in terms of God stooping down to enter the created world and becoming incarnate in Christ. Augustine of Hippo was one of many patristic writers to stress that one of the motivations underlying the mission of Christ was to demonstrate God's love for us. The love of God for a wounded humanity is thus focused on an act of divine humility: the act of God's leaving the glory of heaven to enter the poverty and suffering of the created order and finally to suffer death upon the cross.

The recognition of the fact that Christ's death can be seen as a demonstration of divine love surfaces at the earliest stages of Christian thinking. The third-century writer Clement of Alexandria pointed out how the incarnation of Christ, and especially his death, represents a powerful affirmation of the love of God for humanity and a demand that humanity demonstrate a comparable love for God.

For [Christ] came down, for this he assumed human nature, for this he willingly endured the sufferings of humanity, that by being reduced to the measure of our weakness, he might raise us to the measure of his power. And just before he poured out his offering, when he gave himself as a ransom, he left us a new testament: "I give you my love" (John 13: 34). What is the nature and extent of this love? For each of us he laid down his life, the life which was worth the whole universe, and he requires in return that we should do the same for each other.

Such thoughts have proved a powerful stimulus to the Christian imagination. This theme is developed in an imaginatively powerful way in one of the most reflective Spanish spiritual writers of the Renaissance. Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534) is remembered particularly for her *Book of Consolation*, which was widely admired during the Spanish Golden Age. Her discussion of the passion of Christ is notable in several respects, particularly her explicit use of feminine images to unlock its theological significance. The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is here compared to a woman giving birth. For Juana, reflecting on the pain and sorrow that Jesus suffered in order to give life to the children of God is a powerful affirmation of the love of God for humanity – a love that is here expressed using strongly maternal imagery.

Christ gave birth to us all with very great pains and torments at the time of his cruel and bitter passion. And since we cost him so dearly and the labor through which he gave birth to us was so grueling that it made him sweat drops of blood, he can do nothing but pray and plead for us before the Father, like a very compassionate mother, desiring that we should be saved and that our souls should be enlightened, so that he might not have suffered his pain and torment in vain.

Salvation and the "threefold office of Christ"

At the season of Epiphany (p. 239), the Christian churches recall the visit of the Magi (usually translated as "wise men") – the rulers from the East, who came to visit the infant Jesus at Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 1–12). These mysterious visitors brought three gifts with them: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So might these three gifts tell us anything about how they understood the significance of this infant?

Early church writers believed that they did. Each of these gifts was appropriate for a certain kind of person. They were valuable items, appropriate as gifts for a king in the ancient world: gold was a precious metal, frankincense was a perfume or incense, and myrrh was anointing oil. Indeed, these same three items were apparently among the gifts that King Seleucus Callinicus offered to the god Apollo at the temple in Miletus in 243 BC.

Yet early Christian writers regarded these gifts as more than honorific. Each one disclosed something of the true significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Gold was appropriate for a king, expressing his authority; frankincense was appropriate for a priest, who would make