

Connected to God

The Three Foundational Experiences of Christian Life



...A cord of three strands is not quickly broken

(Ecclesiastes 4:12 - NIV)

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Note: All Bible text included in this material is shown
in italics solely to help that text stand out visually.
Any underlining or bolding of Bible text is added
solely to draw attention to those portions of the text.

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Introduction

Study #1



Objectives

These studies are designed, primarily, to help you understand what the Bible teaches about the three foundational experiences of Christian life—three life-changing experiences that God has provided...to connect us fully to Himself as a disciple...and be the foundation on which we are then to build our life as a disciple:

- (1) being born again, spiritually, as a child of God, the Father,
- (2) being baptized in water, as a believer, into God, the Son (Jesus Christ), and
- (3) being baptized into God, the Holy Spirit.

At the outset, I want to emphasise that I have not prepared this material to support the position of any denomination or 'prove' any pre-determined position on any aspect of these three foundational experiences. Nor have I used any extra-biblical theology/reasoning. Rather, I have examined what the Bible (alone) teaches, when you apply generally-accepted principles of Bible interpretation, correctly and consistently, with the sole objective of letting the Bible speak for itself to disclose what God means by what He has said in His word.

It is important that we have an accurate understanding of what the Bible teaches about these three foundational experiences, so that:

1. We can assess, biblically, which of these three foundational connections to God we have experienced, knowing what the Bible teaches and being able to recognise, and avoid, doctrinal errors that might prevent us from entering into all that God has provided for us.
2. We will seek to fill in any gaps we might identify in our own foundational experience.
3. We can be rightly confident about our theological convictions, if challenged, and be able to reason knowledgeably with people who may have different views on these issues.
4. We will be equipped to help unbelievers become connected to God through these three foundational experiences.
5. We will be equipped to teach and encourage other believers to do all of the above.

The three foundational connections to God

Heb 6:1-2 (NIV): *1 ...let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, 2 instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

God's intention is that we come into His kingdom and then "go on to maturity", building on a "foundation" of "the elementary teachings about Christ". Incidentally, the original word that is translated here as "elementary" doesn't mean "simple" teachings—it means "beginning (or foundational)" teachings.

These "*elementary teachings about Christ*", that are described in this passage, include teachings about: — "*repentance from acts that lead to death*" and "*faith in God*" (one foundational experience), and — "*instruction about baptisms*" (two further foundational experiences).

This describes the three foundational experiences of Christian life...and this will be our focus in these studies.

There is an interesting verse in Ecclesiastes 4:12. Quoting from two different versions:

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (NIV) *A rope made of three cords is hard to break.* (TEV)

This verse presents an analogy that I'm going to use to describe the core proposition of this study:

God has provided a spiritual 'cord of three strands' to connect His children to Himself and this spiritual 'cord' comprises three foundational experiences.

To begin with, there is a principle of Bible interpretation called the "Principle of First Mention". This principle states that the first recorded mention of a topic in the Bible normally gives us an important definition, or explanation, of that topic. So, at the outset, let's look at the first recorded teaching on, and experience of, foundational discipleship in the New Testament. Jesus has risen from the dead, appeared to His disciples, and appointed them to be His witnesses. Now, on the following Day of Pentecost, His disciples have just been filled with the Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised, and Peter is preaching to a crowd that has gathered, drawn by the miraculous signs that accompanied this event—Acts 2:37-41 (NIV - emphasis added):

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call." 40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

I have underlined three phrases, above, that describe the three foundational experiences of Christian life:

1. Repentance (also described in the Bible as being born again, believing in God...),
2. Baptism (in water), in the name of Jesus Christ (as a believer), and
3. Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (also described in the Bible as baptism in/into the Holy Spirit...).

God is triune—one God in three persons—God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ) and God the Holy Spirit. And what we will see, in this series, is that He has mirrored His triunity in His relationship with His followers by establishing three separate foundational experiences, each of which connects each of His children in a unique way primarily to a particular Person in the Trinity.

However, not everyone would agree that there are three separate foundational experiences in Christian life. And there are significant differences, between church movements, in their foundational beliefs and practices. For example, some denominations practise infant baptism, believing that this confers salvation on infants who are baptized. Others believe that personal repentance is necessary for salvation and that water baptism is only appropriate for people who have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Lord of their life. And there are significant differences over what is meant by "receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit", in particular, whether or not this is a separate experience or even a valid experience today.

The existence of such major differences in doctrine and practice, on such crucial foundational issues, raises some important questions, in particular:

- Why are there such significant differences?
- Do these differences matter?
- How do these various beliefs line up with what the Bible teaches?
- Is there a clear pattern of truth?
- How can we know the truth?

This is especially challenging given that theologians and Bible preachers/teachers differ on these important issues, so we may not be confident that we could ever understand what is truth in these foundational areas.

In situations like this, it would be easy to fall back on what we have been taught in the past...or to rely on what someone else teaches. But that won't necessarily lead us to the truth and each of us will have to give an account one day for what we believed, and practised, in relation to these foundational experiences.

I believe that there is a clear pattern of Bible truth in these foundational areas...and that 'ordinary' people can come to a knowledge of the truth in these foundational areas, even if 'experts' differ.

How can we do this? Primarily, through a careful study of the Bible, applying generally-accepted principles of Bible interpretation, honestly and consistently, without trying to prove any predetermined theological position on any issue.

We will let the Bible speak for itself and disclose consistent 'patterns' of truth, both in what it teaches and in what it records about early church practice in these areas.

Application ("App-CTG-Study#1.doc")

1. Why is it important that we experience every foundational connection to God that He has provided for us?
2. Why is it important that we have a correct understanding of the theology of every foundational connection to God?
3. What might be some of the reasons why there are such significant differences in belief and practice between various churches/denominations on these foundational matters?
4. Do such differences matter? Should we focus on what is common between different churches/denominations rather than what is different? Should we focus on Jesus rather than on differences in theology or church practice? Are we fracturing the unity of the Body of Christ by suggesting that these different views can't all be correct...or that we might have a correct understanding of what the Bible teaches in this area?
5. Given these differences, can anyone really be certain what the Bible teaches in this area? If we can be certain, how can we come to that position? If we can't be certain, where does that leave us?
6. What experiences have I had engaging with people who have different views on this subject of the foundational experiences of Christian life?

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Introduction

Study #2



The two spiritual kingdoms

The Bible indicates that there are two spiritual kingdoms and that each person, at any point in time, belongs to one of these two kingdoms. These two kingdoms are described mainly as:

1. the kingdom of God/heaven/light, and
2. the kingdom of Satan/the world/darkness.

For example, Jesus sent Saul (also known as Paul) to the Gentiles *"to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..."* (Acts 26:18 - NIV - emphasis added).

And these same two kingdoms are described clearly in this passage—Col 1:13-14 (NAS - emphasis added):
13 For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

There is no middle ground for anyone—no 'middle kingdom'. Each person is in one of these two kingdoms and each person will spend eternity in one of these two kingdoms.

The Bible also makes it clear that these two kingdoms are as different as night and day...darkness and light. The kingdom of God is ruled by God—the kingdom of Satan is ruled by Satan. And the two kingdoms reflect the nature of their two rulers. God is good—Satan is evil. So the kingdom of God is good and the kingdom of Satan is evil.

Originally only God existed. Then He created beings known as angels. One of the important angels, called Lucifer, rebelled against God and led into rebellion a large number of other angels who established their own kingdom under the leadership of Lucifer, who is also referred to now as Satan or the devil. Satan is totally opposed to God and intent on ruining or destroying everything God has created, especially people, who are the pinnacle of God's creation, because we are created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27).

When God created the earth, and created the first people on earth—Adam and Eve—He described everything He had created as good. There was no evil in the earth...only good. But Satan deceived Eve, and Adam (and Eve) disobeyed God. Sin (wrongdoing) and death (the consequence of, and penalty for, sin) entered human existence and, since then, *every human being, born in the flesh, has been born into the kingdom of darkness with a sin nature inherited, like an hereditary disease, from our original ancestor, Adam—Ps 51:5 (TEV):*
I have been evil from the day I was born; from the time I was conceived, I have been sinful.

In addition, we have all done things in our life that are wrong in God's sight—Rom 3:23 (NIV):
for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Sin separates us from God because God hates sin and the penalty for sin is death. And there is nothing we can do, by our own efforts, to be reconciled to God because there is no sacrifice we can offer to God that is adequate to atone for our sin. God requires a perfect sacrifice and none of us can be perfect by our own efforts—Eph 2:8-9 (NIV):

8 ...by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

But God has made a way for us. He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world, as the perfect sacrifice, to pay the penalty for our sin by dying for us on the cross—1 Peter 1:18-21 (NIV):

18 For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 20 He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

By God's grace, we can repent and believe in (accept/trust in) what God has done for us through Jesus and, thereby, be born spiritually, and transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God...becoming children of God and citizens of the kingdom of God—John 1:12-13 (NIV):

12 to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

This is the first foundational experience of Christian life.

What we will begin to study in more detail is how this transition from one kingdom to the other occurs.

After that we will study the other two foundational experiences of Christian life, through which God completes the process of breaking the power of the bondages of our past (through baptism, in water, into Jesus Christ) and empowers us, by the Holy Spirit, to live an abundant life and engage in fruitful ministry.

Application ("App-CTG-Study#2.doc")

1. Am I convinced that there are two, and only two, spiritual kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan? What are some implications of this?
2. Can I think of any Bible teaching that reinforces this understanding that there are only two spiritual kingdoms...that they are totally opposite in every way...and that there is no 'middle ground' spiritual position/condition acceptable to God?