

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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in italics solely to help that text stand out visually.
Any underlining or bolding of Bible text is added
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Introduction

Study #1



Objectives

These studies are designed to help you understand the biblical theology of the three foundational experiences that connect us to God:

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

It is important that we have an accurate, and adequate, understanding of the theology of these foundational experiences so that:

1. We can assess, accurately, which of these foundational connections to God we have experienced personally.
2. We will seek to fill in any gaps in our foundational experience.
3. We will know what we believe and why we believe that, so that we can:
 - 3.1 recognise, and avoid, doctrinal errors that might prevent us from entering into all that God has provided for us,
 - 3.2 confidently maintain our theological convictions if challenged, and
 - 3.3 reason knowledgeably with people who may have different views but be open to discussion on these issues.
4. We will be capable of teaching and encouraging other believers to do the above.
5. We will be equipped to help unbelievers become connected to God in these foundational experiences.

The three foundational connections

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. (Heb 6:1-2 - NIV)

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*". The original word translated "*elementary teachings*" doesn't mean "simple teachings"—it means "beginning (or foundational) teachings".

In these studies, we will focus on the foundational teachings of:

- "*repentance from acts that lead to death*" and "*faith in God*" (one foundational experience), and
- "*instruction about baptisms*" (two foundational experiences).

Together, these teachings cover three foundational experiences that connect us to God and form the foundation on which our Christian life is to be built.

There is an interesting verse in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament:

Eccl 4:12 (NIV)

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Eccl 4:12 (TEV)

A rope made of three cords is hard to break.

This verse presents an analogy 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 of that topic. So, at the outset, let's look at the first recorded teaching on, and experience of, salvation 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.

In verse 38 above, I have underlined three phrases that describe 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 as baptism in 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 study, 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 to each person of the Godhead.

However, not everyone would agree that this verse describes three separate foundational experiences in Christian life. Nor would they necessarily agree on what these terms mean. There are significant differences in belief and practice between various church groups on these matters. 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 personally repented and made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Lord of their life. There are also significant differences over what is meant by "receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit", in particular, whether or not it is a separate experience or even a valid experience for today.

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

- Why are there such significant differences?
- Do these differences matter?
- Is there a clear pattern of truth?
- How can we know the truth?

This is especially challenging given that Bible scholars 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 have believed, and practised, in this area.

I believe that there is a clear pattern of truth in these 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 sound principles of Bible interpretation and using appropriate reference materials—without setting out to try to prove a predetermined theological position. Rather, **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?

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2. Why is it important that we have a correct understanding of the theology of every foundational connection to God?

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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?

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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?

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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 not, where does that leave us?

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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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Connected to God

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 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?

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- 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?

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