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Key Bible Concepts

*Defining the basic terms
of the Christian faith*

David Gooding John Lennox



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Key Bible Concepts

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1 CHAPTER

Introduction

No one can call himself truly educated without some acquaintance with the Bible, which has had, and still has, such a profound impact on world thought. It was the first major book ever printed and the first in movable type (in a Latin translation on Gutenberg's press in Mainz, Germany, in 1455). No other book has been read by more people and published in more languages than the Bible.

As we read it, we shall come across words and concepts which, though in some sense familiar, we do not immediately understand since they are being used as technical terms. This should not blunt our interest—rather the reverse, it should increase it. For in this modern world we all sooner or later have to learn the meaning of technical terms in one or more fields of knowledge, and it is in the understanding of those terms that the real interest lies. Someone who wants to be a good cook must learn the difference between roasting, grilling, frying, poaching and boiling, and why you would use one process with some foods and another with others. Someone who aims to be a motor mechanic must know what a piston is, and a

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carburettor, and a cylinder; the difference between a petrol engine and a diesel engine; and what clutches, gears, and accelerators are for. And all of us who learn to use computers find ourselves confronted by a whole array of terms which we need to master.

As in any other field, it is in getting to grips with the technical terms in the Bible that leads not only to deeper understanding of them but also to an increased ability to communicate their meaning to others, thus opening a window for them on a whole new world.

So in these few chapters we shall be studying these technical terms, and in this introduction we shall briefly survey the ground we intend to cover.

Holiness

The logical place to start is with God and since one of the most important terms which describes God is 'holy' we shall start with that. However, just here we might meet an objection. 'I don't believe in God,' says someone; 'so I am not interested in his holiness, whatever that may mean. I live my life without acknowledging any god whatever.'

Well, those are very interesting statements and claims. The first two are certainly credible; but the third can scarcely be true. The weight of human experience over centuries of history is against it. It all depends, of course, on what you mean by *god*. Multitudes of people all down the ages have decided with Nietzsche that 'God is dead' and decided to banish from their minds all belief in the one true God. To some extent they have succeeded, but at a price. For thereafter they have found it practically

impossible to live either intellectually or emotionally in a completely god-less world. Deliberately or subconsciously, they have filled the vacuum left by the dismissal of the one true God with all kinds of substitute gods.

Even the stoutest atheist cannot avoid considering what powers brought him and the universe into existence, and what powers will eventually destroy both. He may not call them 'gods', but he might as well; for they are the powers that ultimately control him, and not he them. The atheist dismisses the idea of a personal Creator, and concludes that mindless, impersonal, blind matter and forces are responsible for his existence and for that of the universe. He thus destroys at one stroke all hope of there being any purpose behind his existence. But then he finds that he cannot just exist without some purpose to live for, without any thing bigger than himself to believe in, without any supreme values to honour, and without any cause to devote himself to, and, if need be, sacrifice for. Since he cannot live for and serve the one true God, he invents other lesser purposes and goals, some large and noble and some small and very ignoble. He does not call them 'gods' but he might as well: it comes to the same thing in the end.

Over the course of history, people have made a goddess out of sex (the Greeks called her Aphrodite), a god of alcohol (the Greeks called him Dionysus or Bacchus), a god of war (the Greeks called him Ares, and the Romans called him Mars), a god of money, of pleasure, of fame, a god of the State or even a god of themselves (as many totalitarian dictators have done). Faced with the seemingly unaccountable vicissitudes of life, the atheist man-in-the-street mostly

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decides that everything is ruled by chance and when he buys a lottery ticket he hopes that Chance will smile on him. Many ancient Greeks thought the same and made a goddess out of it and called her Tyche. And both ancient and modern evolutionists hold that chance is ultimately responsible for the appearance of human beings on earth. Others take the opposite view, that human beings are predetermined machines, and that free will is an illusion. The ancient world had a name for that too. They called it Fate, and made a god of that as well.

Centuries of experience have thus shown that the question is not whether you will believe in God or not, but whether you will believe in the one true God who claims to have made you or in one or many of these other things which you have made into substitute gods.

We shall begin, then, by studying what the Bible means when it talks of the holiness of the one true God. Even an atheist could find it instructive to compare his character and qualities with those of the substitute deities.

Sin

Of course, once admit the possibility that we humans have been created by a personal holy God, then it will not be long before the question of *sin* forces itself into the conversation. Now all healthy-minded people are against crime, and feel strongly that it should be dealt with justly and very firmly; hence prisons and psychiatric institutions. But criminals form no more than a small percentage of the total population. Far more significant is the fact that every single member of the population is to a lesser or