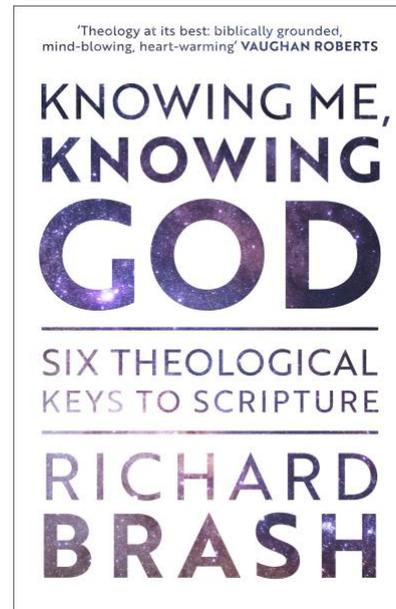


Knowing Me, Knowing God

Six Theological Keys
to Scripture



Study Guide

Richard Brash

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How to use this study guide

I wrote this study guide to help you to lead a series of small-group inductive studies based on my book, *Knowing Me, Knowing God: Six Theological Keys to Scripture* (*KMKG* for short). The study guide is geared towards a series of eight studies, each one of which might last between an hour and ninety minutes. It is therefore suitable for a term's worth of study for university students, or as a short course to be used in church homegroups and similar settings.

Of course, there are different ways to arrange the material. Each study requires participants to read the relevant chapter in advance of the meeting. If this is too much reading for your group members, studies can be taken at a slower pace, perhaps breaking up the material in the introduction and main chapters to make a course of fifteen studies in total. (The final study on the conclusion is shorter anyway to allow for more reflection and application, and probably doesn't need to be split into two.)

The studies here may equally be used, with some modification, in a one-to-one discipleship setting. They could also be adapted to form a short course involving a bit more up-front teaching based on the material in *KMKG*. I could imagine situations where they might be useful for personal study, although that is not the main purpose for which they are designed.

If you've already read (or at least flicked through) *KMKG*, you may have noticed that there are three suggested 'questions for reflection or discussion' after the introduction and each of chapters 1-6. The studies in this study guide add 'flesh' to the 'bare bones' of the questions given in the book. I hope they will help you to make reading through this book in a small group a more interactive and fulfilling experience.

Of course, you know your particular group best. For that reason, please use this study guide as a reference and a tool, but don't feel bound by it.

In a time when we have seen remarkable growth in web-based learning, let me make a final suggestion that might have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago. I'm a missionary based in Japan, but thanks to the internet I have the ability to 'visit' your church or group wherever you are in the world, with all the appropriate online tools for teaching effectively, even at a distance. It may be that you would like me to 'join you' to teach a series of sessions based on the material in *KMKG*, or perhaps just a one-off. If that's something you would like to consider, please do get in touch via my website, www.richardbrash.net.

May the studies in this guide be a source of blessing and encouragement to you and your group. If you've been particularly encouraged, do drop me a line to let me know. Sometimes authors can use a bit of encouragement too! Of course, I'd also be pleased to hear any suggestions or corrections for future editions.

Richard F. Brash

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Study ①: Introduction

Summary:

Systematic theology doesn't always get a good press, even in the church! Many people think of it as a distraction from the Bible and from loving and serving Jesus Christ. Indeed, there's a caricature of systematic theology as the imposition on Scripture of 'Greek' philosophical categories, which are supposed to corrupt the simple truth of God's Word. This is a shame (to say the least) because doing systematic theology well can be an edifying and God-honouring help in interpreting the Bible and equipping believers to know, love and serve God.

There are great resources in systematic theology for Christian life and Christian ministry. But, with a variety of systematic theology 'options' available, and many a massive tome to discourage potential readers, how can we best get oriented for this task? The six theological 'keys' to Scripture presented in this book are a great starting-point, and – in dependence on our forebears in the faith and with the Holy Spirit's help – they should also help to keep us 'on track' as faithful readers of the Bible and followers of Christ.

Aims of study:

- To understand what 'systematic theology' is, and why it is important for knowing God and living the Christian life.
- To answer objections to systematic theology that are common among evangelical Christians.
- To see how systematic theology and biblical theology are two *complementary* and *mutually-enlightening* ways to bring together and present biblical teaching.
- To recognise various 'dialectics' in Scripture, and see how they can help us to appreciate God's truth in its fullness.
- To introduce the six theological 'keys' to Scripture, and understand something of their use for Bible readers.

Starter questions:

Read this quote from the great English evangelical preacher Charles Simeon (1759-1836):

God has not revealed his truth in a system; the Bible has no system as such. Lay aside system and fly to the Bible; receive its words with simple submission, and without an eye to any system. Be Bible Christians not system Christians.

- What concerns do you think might lie behind a view like this one?
- Before reading the introduction to *KMKG*, what was your impression of 'theology'? What about 'systematic' theology?

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- What are the potential problems that might result from thinking, 'We don't need theology. We just need the Bible'? (p. 3)
- Do we need systematic as well as biblical theology? What is the relationship between these two? (p. 5)
- How can we have *our* theology better conformed to *God's* theology? (p. 9)

- What does Brash mean by a ‘dialectic’? Give examples from Scripture. How can biblical ‘dialectics’ help us better to understand God’s truth? (pp. 12-13)
- What does Brash mean when he says that the six theological keys are to be used like a ‘compass’? (p. 12) Or like ‘guard rails’ in ten-pin bowling? (p. 11)

Bible passage: Matthew 22:34-40

- Here, Jesus talks about loving God with our minds. What do these verses hint at about the place of (systematic) theology in the Christian life, both *positively* (why we might need it) and *negatively* (why we must be careful to keep it in its right place and proportion)?

Suggested application questions:

- Can you think of a time when systematic theology has helped you in knowing God or in living the Christian life?
- Which of the six theological keys in this book sounds most interesting to you? Why? (p. 14)
- How could you incorporate more of a *theo*-logical approach to Scripture alongside a *chrono*-logical approach in (a) your Bible reading; (b) [*if appropriate*] your Bible teaching? What potential benefits can you foresee?

For further study:

I recommend for further reading Kelly Kopic’s excellent volume *A Little Book for New Theologians: How and Why to Study Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012). Kopic is especially strong in showing the inseparable connection between *theology* and *life*. The book really is ‘little’ – only 120 pages and pocket-size – and would be an excellent add-on for someone in your group who wanted to take their study a bit deeper, or indeed for you as a group leader.

Study ②: Chapter 1: *God is not like us*

Summary:

The first of our six theological ‘keys’ to Scripture is: *God is not like us*. Theologians call this the *Creator-creature distinction*. It tells us that, at the level of being, God has nothing in common with his creation. This is because God is infinite, and creation (including of course humanity) is finite. This ‘key’ is taught through the Bible in a number of ways: (1) by the distinction between God as Creator and Saviour on the one hand, and man as a creature needing salvation on the other; (2) by the distinction between the necessary and independent being of God revealed in the divine name ‘I AM’, and the dependent and contingent being of man; (3) by the distinction between things that only God can do (and man cannot do) and things that God cannot do (and man can or must do); (4) by the distinction between descriptions of God’s nature as ‘love’, ‘light’, or ‘spirit’, on the one hand, and man as ‘dust’, or ‘flesh and blood’ and so on; (5) by the distinction between God as simple and triune, and man as complex and unipersonal.

The implications of the theological key *God is not like us* extend to both doctrine and practice. At the level of doctrine, we are guarded from the errors of pantheism, panentheism, polytheism, and Open Theism. At the level of practice, the key has implications for our worship, our self-understanding and moral worth, our salvation, and our prayer lives.

Aims of study:

- To appreciate the uniqueness of God in his essence and his works.
- To understand the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and man, and in what sense we cannot compare God with anything in creation.
- To understand what the Bible means when it describes God as ‘love’, ‘light’, and ‘spirit’.
- To understand why the relationship that God has with creation is different from the relationship that creation has with God.
- To learn various divine attributes and what these tell us about God.
- To see yourself as finite, created, dependent, contingent, complex, and unipersonal.
- To grow in various areas of doctrine and Christian living, by recognising some implications of the theological key *God is not like us*, and the corresponding understandings of God and self that it opens up.

Starter questions:

- Shakespeare famously asked his beloved: *Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?* Is it possible to describe something or someone incomparable? How?
- When it comes to knowing God and yourself, which set of concepts interests you more: *essence, substance, and nature* or *personality, identity, and integrity*? Why do you think this is?

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- What does it mean to say that God’s *essence* and his *existence* coincide? (p. 20)
- Do God and Joseph really not share in the quality of being righteous? (p. 21) Why not?
- What is the difference between God’s relationship with creation, and creation’s relationship with God? (p. 28) Why does the difference matter?

- Can you think of any more examples of things than only God can do (or be), beyond the ones that Brash gives on pp. 28-30?
- What does it mean to say that 'God is light' and 'God is love'? (pp. 32-33)

Bible passage: Exodus 3:1-15

- What can we understand about God on the basis of his personal name 'I AM'? (See also pp. 26-27 of *KMKG* for more on this passage.)

Suggested application questions:

- This chapter describes human beings as finite, created, dependent, contingent, complex, and unipersonal. Which of these descriptions helps you to get a better understanding of how *you* stand before the unique God?
- How might understanding the theological key *God is not like us* help you in your reading of the Bible? What about in your Christian life?
- What could you say to someone who says, 'All this talk of essence and substance and nature is just Greek philosophy. It has nothing to do with the Bible.'

For further study:

Donald Macleod's book *Behold Your God* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1995) is a great place to begin further study of some of the themes in this chapter. It's a rigorous but accessible treatment of the doctrine of God. As the quote on the front cover of my edition of Macleod's book says, 'It is impossible to honour God as we ought, unless we know Him as He is.'

For something a bit more advanced, you might want to try Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2017). This is a new edition, with an introduction and helpful notes by William Edgar.

On the doctrine of humanity, I'll offer some references at the end of the next study.

Study ③: Chapter 2: *God has made us like himself*

Summary:

The second theological 'key' to Scripture introduced in this book is: *God has made us like himself*. This is not a contradiction of the first key: rather, it sets up an 'antinomy', and both truths must be maintained. Each human being is the image of God. That is, above all, what sets man apart from other creatures. This understanding of man is known as the 'essential' sense of the image. We can understand what the Bible means by looking at the ancient Near Eastern background, in which we find foreshadows of biblical truth. As God's 'image' man is created as a king or vicegerent, placed in God's cosmic temple as the 'face' of God to the world.

God has established a creaturely similarity between man and himself. Human beings therefore represent God to the world as his images. In theological terms, man is an analogue of God, or an ectype of God's heavenly archetype. Human beings are created to reflect, resemble, represent, and relate to, God. As the essential image of God, man cannot 'lose' this status, even in the fall. Uniquely, Jesus Christ is the image of God by sharing in the divine essence. This qualifies him to be our Saviour.

God is *near* because of the likeness he has established with us in creation. The theological key *God has made us like himself* has implications for our worship, our self-understanding and moral worth, our salvation, our evangelism, and our interpretation of the Bible.

Aims of study:

- To recognise that God is immanent as well as transcendent.
- To understand what it means for you to be the essential image of God.
- To understand yourself as the analogue and ectype of God, created with a certain type of similarity to the Creator.
- To see that in the essential sense, it is not possible to 'lose' the image of God.
- To recognise Jesus Christ as the unique image of God, by virtue of his sharing in the divine essence.
- To apply the self-understanding and God-understanding outlined in this chapter to various practical areas of our lives, including, for example, our worship, evangelism, and Bible reading.

Starter questions:

- Have you ever visited a pagan (non-Christian) temple or shrine? What messages did it convey about the god or gods enshrined there, and how human beings should relate to them? [If you have never visited a pagan place of worship, you could imagine what that might be like based on what you have heard or read, or you could look online.]

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- How does the ancient Near Eastern background help us understand the biblical concept of the 'image' of God? (pp. 46-48)
- What is the meaning of the two vertical lines in Van Til's diagram of God and creation in relationship? (figure 2.2, p. 49)

- Compare figures 2.3 (p. 50) and 2.4 (p. 51). What are the key similarities and differences? What is the significance of the diagrams for understanding what it means to be the image of God?
- Theologian Alexander Schmemmann has labelled humankind as first *Homo adorans* (man as worshipper) and only secondarily *Homo sapiens* (man as thinker) (p. 50). What does this mean, for both the Christian and the non-Christian?
- What other ways does God relate us, according to Scripture, apart from the ones that Brash lists on p. 53?
- ‘Everything we do (except sin), we do because in some sense God does it first.’ (p. 55, and see also the footnote) Do you agree? How might this affect the way you understand your vocation/calling in God’s world?

Bible passage: Genesis 1:26-31

- Brash argues that it is better to translate Genesis 1:26 as ‘Let us make man *as* our image’, rather than ‘Let us make man *in* our image’ (ESV). Why? What is the difference in meaning?

Suggested application questions:

- Do you know anyone who thinks of God as being like the ‘god’ of Deism? (p. 60) How might you begin to communicate to them some of what you’ve learned in this chapter?
- Think back to a church service you have attended (or perhaps helped to lead) recently. What messages did it give about who God is and how we should relate to him? What about the messages about who *we* are in relation to God? How do these messages relate to the themes you have studied in this chapter? Might you approach a service any differently on the basis of what you’ve read and talked about?
- The eternal God is *near* us (Acts 17:27-28). What difference should that make to the way you live this week?

For further study:

A good introduction to the doctrine of humanity (or ‘theological anthropology’) is Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). This book is mostly balanced and convincing. However, because Hoekema persists in using the language of humankind’s creation *in* the image of God, he continues to give the impression that the ‘image of God’ is something either extrinsic to (outside) both God and man, or else intrinsic to God, but separate from man himself: a sort of (quasi-Platonic) ‘idea’ in God’s mind according to which man corresponds or in the likeness of which man is fashioned. As I argued in *KMKG*, it is better to understand Scripture as teaching that man is created *as* the image of God. This point aside, Hoekema’s book is still well worth reading.

If you are still to be convinced by my argument about the image, you might want to look at some of the books mentioned in the footnotes for this chapter, especially Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), and Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2006). I don’t agree with Kline’s specific understanding of Genesis 1:26 as God’s address to his ‘heavenly council’. That small point aside, his book is excellent and thought-provoking – if quite high-level – theological reading of Scripture.

Study ④: Chapter 3: *We cannot comprehend God*

Summary:

In this study and the next we move into the area of knowledge or 'epistemology'. The most basic question that both chapters address is how it is possible for finite human beings to know an infinite God. In this study, the third of our six theological 'keys' to Scripture is: *We cannot comprehend God*. Like the other theological keys in *KMKG*, incomprehensibility is clearly taught in Scripture.

On the basis of God's simplicity, God's knowledge is his essence. That means that God cannot be 'separated' from his knowledge. He *is* his own theology. This divine self-knowledge is sometimes called *archetypal* theology. What God knows to be, he wills to be, and therefore it *is*. In contrast, our human knowledge is creaturely: finite, fragmented, and (now) fallen.

This theological key can help stop us from overreaching ourselves in trying to grasp and express what is going on in God's essence. A good example is our interpretation of Scripture texts that say God 'regrets' or even 'repents'. We must interpret Scripture in light of Scripture: those texts that are clearer to us then become the interpretative framework by which we can understand those texts that seem more obscure. There is a distinction between God as known in his effects as experienced by ever-changing creatures like us, and God in his essence.

Recognising our lack of ability to comprehend God can help us in our discipleship, give us much consolation, and even impart joy to us as we rejoice in our epistemological limitations.

Aims of study:

- To appreciate the incomprehensibility of God.
- To develop a deeper sense of God's gracious condescension that underlies our knowledge of God.
- To be able to articulate something of the relationship between God's essence, God's knowledge, and God's will.
- To recognise our own knowledge as finite and fallible, as well as in constant flux.
- To apply the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture to various texts that say God 'changed his mind' or similar.
- To allow a fresh acknowledgement of our inability to grasp God's essence to refresh our discipleship, and give us consolation and joy in the God who knows all things.

Starter questions:

- Read this quote from U.S. Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld in 2002:

[A]s we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.

How might your life have been different if you had known the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns? What might have been the downsides of such knowledge?

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- What does the 'incomprehensibility' of God mean? (p. 66)
- What did Herman Bavinck mean when he started his discussion of the doctrine of God with the famous words 'Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics.' (p. 70)
- What's the point of Brash's banana illustration on p. 72? (The 'changes' in my attitude are sometimes called 'Cambridge changes': you can search online to find out why. Some theologians use this term to specify the particular way that God 'changes'.)
- What is the relationship between the incomprehensibility of God and the immutability of God? (p. 75) How does this help us with our Bible reading?
- St. Augustine said, 'If you comprehend, it is not God.' (See *KMKG* p. 77) Why not? So what?

Bible passage: Jeremiah 18:7-11

- Brash quotes this passage on page 73 of *KMKG*. Have a look at the wider context in Jeremiah 18, from a time not long before Judah's exile. What is God's intention in this passage? (*i.e.* What does God aim to achieve by speaking these words?) How does the image of God as the potter in verse 2-6 shed light on the later verses? What options are presented to the people of Judah in verse 7-11? What actually happens in response to (or following on from) these words? (See verses 12 and 18.) How can we know that there is not a real change in God's knowledge or his will (his essence) here? Why is this important?

Suggested application questions:

- How could you explain to a non-Christian God's incomprehensibility? Why would you want to?
- How do the three applications of our ability to comprehend God's essence given by Gregory of Nazianzus on p. 76 work in practice?
- Ezekiel's vision of God caused him to fall on his face (Ezekiel 1:28. See *KMKG* pp. 76-77). What was it about the vision that produced this reaction? What should we learn from this about how we can relate to God?
- *Having worked through this study, you might now return to the question raised as a starter question above: Why might it be good for us not to know all things as God knows them?*

For further study:

My favourite introduction to Christian epistemology is John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987). Frame's book would be good further reading for both this study and the next.

For a higher (almost sublime) level treatment of the main theme of this study, you surely couldn't do better than turn to Herman Bavinck's chapter on 'The Incomprehensibility of God' in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 27-52.

Study ⑤: Chapter 4: *God makes himself known to us*

Summary:

With the theological key *God makes himself known to us*, this study focuses on the doctrine of God's revelation. The Bible teaches that knowledge of God is not just possible, but universal: in one sense, *everyone* knows God. However, this universal knowledge cannot save us. For salvation, we need the knowledge of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. But even without sin, knowing God would be a theological 'problem', given our status as creatures.

The Bible shows us how to understand revelation. In the Old Testament, God 'showed himself', 'made himself to be seen', and 'made himself to be known', particularly at times of special significance in salvation history. This revelation was both verbal and visual (in the case of theophanies and mystical visions). In the New Testament, God's revelation is clearly both *propositional* and *personal*, and it is focused on the revelation of Jesus Christ, clothed in his gospel.

God reveals himself to us. However, we do not know God as God knows himself, archetypally. Rather, our knowledge is the ectype, or copy, of God's knowledge. Even so, the copy is a true reflection of the original, accommodated to our created capacity and understanding.

Knowledge of God is to be found in created things. The special revelation which we receive now through Scripture opens our eyes to the revelation of God in nature and history. Knowledge of God is supremely *useful* for us: ultimately for our salvation in Christ. Indeed, such knowledge is the greatest blessing – even eternal life.

Aims of study:

- To understand in what sense *every* human being knows God.
- To see how the Bible, in both Testaments, presents God's revelation, particularly, *what* is revealed, *how*, and *to whom*.
- To recognise that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment and climax of God's revelation.
- To parse the distinction (and the relationship) between God and his revelation of himself, in terms of archetypal and ectypal knowledge of God.
- To understand that God's revelation is 'accommodated' to our human capacities.
- To introduce the distinction between the 'essence' of God and his 'energies'.
- To understand that true knowledge of God is to be found in creatures – as revelation (both general and special) is given in the context of nature and history.
- To apply the key to our hearts, that we might seek and prize knowledge of God.

Starter questions:

- The Agnostic Association of America (AAA) boasts (on their Facebook page),

WE ARE THE BEST AT KNOWING THE LEAST....and damn proud of it.

Do you have 'agnostic' friends or family members? Why do they say they are agnostic? Is there something positive about their position that we could affirm?

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- What is the point of Van Til's 'little child' illustration on p. 81? In what sense is there no such thing as an 'atheist'?
- We can see from the use of the Hebrew verb *niglāh* that knowing God depends on God revealing himself. (p. 83) Why can't we know God without revelation?
- In the New Testament, what are we told about the role of each Person of the Trinity in revelation? (p. 90)
- What is the distinction between 'propositional' and 'personal' revelation? How does the Bible hold these things together, particularly in Jesus? (pp. 91-93)
- Is God the same as his revelation of himself? (pp. 93-96) Why does this matter for us?
- (related to the previous question) What is the point of the distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge of God?
- How does God reveal himself in created things? (pp. 97-98)

Bible passage: Matthew 11:25-30

- Brash quotes this passage on p. 89 of *KMKG*. Compare these verses with Luke 10:21-24. In these two contexts (Matthew and Luke), what should we understand by 'these things'? To whom has God revealed them? And from whom has he hidden them? What do these verses tell us about how the Father and the Son co-operate to reveal God?

Suggested application questions:

- In what way can the biblical truth that *everyone knows God* help us in our evangelism and Christian witness?
- How can we (as believers) know God better? Where, in particular, should we look?
- Are there any potential dangers to be avoided as we gain this knowledge?
- What is the difference between knowing *about* God, on the one hand, and knowing God, on the other? How can you relate these two better in your own life?

For further study:

The best account of revelation that I have found is in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 281-494. This is not for the faint-hearted, though. Bavinck calls revelation the *principium externum*. This is traditional (Latin) theological terminology for the foundation of our knowledge (of God) that is outside us. In Bavinck's theology, this external principle corresponds to (or gives rise to) an internal principle or foundation, which is our response of faith. There's so much great stuff in Bavinck, but it takes time and effort to read and digest him.

Something a bit simpler can be found in John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), which was also recommended as additional reading for the previous study.

Study ⑥: Chapter 5: *Our sin separates us from God*

Summary:

The last dialectic pair of theological *keys* in *KMKG* focuses on ethical issues, in the category of *acting*. This is more than just the question of what is morally right or wrong: it is about who we human beings now *are*: sinners before a holy and righteous God. In this chapter/study, we focus on the ‘bad news’ that sets us up for the ‘good news’ revealed in the gospel, with the theological key *Our sin separates us from God*.

There are significant differences between human and divine acts. But there are some similarities. For example, like God we act *freely*, in the sense that we do what our ‘hearts’ desire. This grounds our moral responsibility: our acts are our own. As creatures, we owe God full obedience. We were created to act for his glory. But we fail to do so. God, on the other hand, can be described as ‘pure act’. He has no ‘potential’ in his essence to be what he is not. His will never changes. In perfect knowledge and power, he does the good that he pleases.

Adam, the first man, is significant for us all because of the covenant that God established with him and his descendants. We are included in this covenant. The covenant defines our ‘natural’ ethical status since Adam’s fall into sin: we are covenant-breakers, under a curse.

We are now constituted sinners. Our sin takes many forms, but in its many manifestations it always serves to confirm our ethical separation from God, who maintains his justice by ‘cutting off’ sinners. This is a solemn problem. In addition, we are ‘cut off’ or separated from one another. The depth of our brokenness is profound, and no-one is truly ‘neutral’ in their stance towards God. This ought to drive us to our knees to seek mercy at the cross of Jesus, who experienced the full consequences of being ‘cut off’ from God in the place of his people.

Aims of study:

- To consider what it means for God and human agents to ‘act’.
- To understand what the Bible says about who we humans are *ethically* and what this means for our relationship with the God who is holy.
- To appreciate the significance of Adam for our ethical status, in the context of the covenant of creation or works, in which we are included.
- To see that God’s acts enable us to ‘name’ him, but they do not ‘define’ him, for God remains God apart from his acts.
- To recognise the effects of total depravity in our world and our own lives.
- To consider the severe consequences of the ethical separation from God that is caused by our sin, and to lament the depth of our brokenness before God.
- To understand ourselves (if we are believers) as involved in a spiritual battle of eternal significance.
- To see in the cross of Jesus the ultimate demonstration of the seriousness of sin.

Starter questions:

- The early fifth-century British monk, Pelagius, wrote: *The best incentive for the mind consists in teaching it that it is possible to do anything which one really wants to do.*

What do you make of this suggestion? Where do you agree / disagree with Pelagius?

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- Why do humans do what we do? (p. 106) (*i.e.* On what basis do we act?)
- What does it mean to say that God is 'pure act'? (p. 107)
- What's the problem with saying that Jesus is the definition of God? (p. 108)
- Why does our creation as God's image obligate us to obey God's law? (p. 110)
- What has the covenant with Adam got to do with us? (pp. 110-113)
- Can you explain the doctrine of total depravity? (p. 113) What does it mean, and what *doesn't* it mean?
- What can we learn about sin from 2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51? (pp. 114-115)
- What is God's just judgment on sin? (pp. 115-116)

Bible passage: Psalm 37:35-40

- Brash lists the repeated references to God 'cutting off' the wicked in this psalm on p. 116. Where should you identify yourself in these verses? Are you the 'wicked, ruthless man'? Or are you the 'man of peace' who is 'blameless and upright'? Does verse 39 mean that God helps those who help themselves? In this light, where should you place your hope?

Suggested application questions:

- How does recognition of the depth of your sin and the solemnity of its consequences affect your relationship with God?
- Do you experience the 'ethical dialectic' that Brash describes on p. 120? What does it feel like, and how should we interpret those feelings?
- Given the reality of 'noetic sin' (pp. 121-122) how can we be sure that the true and sound wisdom we are pursuing in these studies is attainable?
- How might reflecting on the *necessity* of the cross of Christ lead you helpfully in your devotional life?

For further study:

Some of the best books on sin – from a pastoral as well as a theological perspective – have come from the seventeenth-century Puritans, not least from the pen of John Owen. Owen's works on sin and temptation have been brought together in a modern, updated edition with a foreword by John Piper, in *Overcoming Sin and Temptation: Three Classic Works by John Owen* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

Another classic, from a slightly later period, is Thomas Boston's *Human Nature In Its Fourfold State* (1720). There are various free versions of this available online, or there is a printed edition published by the Banner of Truth in 1964. Boston's account of human nature in the state of 'entire depravity' elaborates on many of the themes in this study.

Study ⑦: Chapter 6: *God overcomes sin and makes us his own*

Summary:

This study focuses on the sixth and final theological key *God overcomes sin and makes us his own*. It includes discussion of God as the one who acts to save us, and of human beings who are both commanded and enabled to act *like God* in response. This is the ‘good news’ that corresponds to the ‘bad news’ of the previous study.

Unlike the other keys in *KMKG*, this one applies in particular to God’s elect, and depends on God’s free grace. It is worked out in the history of special revelation, even though it is planned out in eternity. This means we must refer to *chrono*-logic, and the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration, in order fully to account for it.

God is our Saviour. In salvation, by the trinitarian work of Father, Son and Spirit, God overcomes sin, and draws sinners near. Through this salvation, man is restored to full status as beloved sons and heirs of God. As forgiven sinners, we’re then empowered to live in newness of life. We become, ethically, *like God*, participating in God’s holy nature. In all of this, Jesus is our pioneer and pattern. In him, we are justified and sanctified.

God’s salvation has covenant relationship as its goal. To establish and maintain this relationship, God shows great condescension, pays a great cost, and follows through with great commitment. By his grace in Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he enables us to make a response befitting his own children, summed up as a life of worship.

Aims of study:

- To see how the ‘bad news’ associated with God’s judgment of our sin is the necessary setting for appreciating the ‘good news’ of the gospel.
- To understand the theological key *God overcomes sin and makes us his own* as planned in eternity, worked out in time, and limited in its application to God’s elect.
- To recognise God as our Saviour, and understand salvation as a trinitarian work of God, in which each Person of God plays his role.
- To view ourselves (if we are believers) as saved creatures, restored to a high status and equipped for a renewed calling: to become *like God*, ethically.
- To understand Jesus as our pioneer and our pattern in justification and sanctification.
- To be humbled by the great condescension, cost, and commitment associated with God’s acting for our salvation.
- To recognise the centrality of worship in the renewed life of believers, and the ways in which we are called to act like God as his children.
- To distinguish between redemption accomplished and redemption applied, and between Christ’s active and passive righteousness which are both imputed to us.

Starter questions:

- Author Philip Yancey writes, ‘Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less... Grace means that God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.’
In what sense is Yancey right? Is there another sense in which this is not the whole truth? (See Jude 21, for example.)

Questions to review understanding and for discussion:

- What's so 'astonishing' about John Owen's 'astonishing dispensation'? (p. 125)
- Why do we need the 'bad news' in order fully to appreciate the 'good news'? (p. 126)
- In what ways is the theological key in this chapter/study different from the other keys? (pp. 127-129)
- Why does Brash say that, biblically, salvation is a *trinitarian* work of God? (p. 131)
- In what different senses can human beings be called 'children' of God? (p. 132)
- What is the difference between justification and sanctification? (pp. 133-134) How are these applied to us?
- What was Jesus' 'humiliation'? (p. 135) What does Brash mean by the Spirit's humiliation?
- What is Jesus' 'glorification' (p. 138) and what does it mean for believers today?

Bible passage: 2 Peter 1:1-11

- Brash mentions verse 4 of 2 Peter 1 on p. 133. What does Peter mean when he says that believers 'become partakers of the divine nature'? If believers have already 'obtained a faith of equal standing with [Peter's] by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (v. 1) as evidence that they are called and chosen by God (v.10) why does Peter tell them to 'make every effort' (v. 5) and to be 'all the more diligent'? (v. 10) What do believers have to look forward to? Can they be assured that they will certainly receive these promised blessings? (See also p. 139)

Suggested application questions:

- How should believers understand our primary identity, and what impact should that have on how we live? (p. 140)
- What elements of the new life in Christ do you need to prioritise, with the Spirit's help? (pp. 140-141)
- What are the implications for your daily life of your new status as God's 'son'? (p. 141)
- How can we help *each other* in living out our response to God for – and in – the gift of union with Jesus Christ? (pp. 142-143)

For further study:

There are many excellent books on living out the Christian life in the context of the new status that God has given us in Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit. An excellent start would be Sinclair Ferguson's *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life* (Sanford: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007).

Study ⑧: Conclusion: *Theology that Transforms*

Summary:

This final study offers an opportunity to draw together various ideas from *KMKG*, and perhaps to spend a bit more time on reflection, application and prayer. The brief conclusion to *KMKG* revisits the six theological keys to Scripture introduced in the book and encourages us to link our *understanding* of the biblical principles with our *life of faith*. As a group leader, you might want to ask group members preparing for this final study to note any **questions** of their own about what they have been learning, in advance of your meeting. This may help you to gauge where the studies have been making their mark. It may also give you some guidance on what, if appropriate, would be suitable for your group to do next.

Starter questions:

- Would you say you were more liable to *overestimate* yourself or to *underestimate* God? When have you done this recently? How are these two things related?

Questions for discussion and application:

- What are the three ‘theological virtues’ and how can the six keys presented in *KMKG* help to foster them? Try to think of concrete examples in your own life.
- What’s the fundamental difference between Calvin’s ‘senseless curiosity’ (in the prayer on p. 146) and the ‘true and sound wisdom’ that Calvin advised us to pursue? (See the preface to *KMKG*, p. xi.) How can you be sure to seek after the one, while avoiding the other?

Review and application questions for this series as a whole:

- How many of the six theological keys to Scripture in these studies can you remember? Is there a good way to help you remember them? (Perhaps look back to p. 126.)
- Which one of the six keys has helped you most in your understanding? And which has helped you most in living the Christian life? Can you give examples of how this has worked?
- Have a brief look through the glossary to *KMKG* (pp. 148-152). Pick out one or two terms that you have learned or thought more about during this series, and share those with the group. Do you have remaining questions about any of these terms? [Note that most of these terms are also found in the general index to *KMKG*, which will direct you to references throughout the book if necessary.]
- Do you now have a different view of systematic theology than you had before you started this series? If so, in what way has your view changed? Can you think of ways that you and your group could continue to learn and benefit from faithful systematic theology as you go on meeting together?

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