

Monergism

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

SAM STORMS

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by Sam Storms

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Our Knowledge of God

We must never forget that our *knowledge of God is a gift, not a given*. What I mean by this is that we all too often presume that what we know of God is either something we gained by self-exertion, dedication, and study, or it is something we deserve, perhaps something that is our by right or entitlement. We should never treat the knowledge of God as a given. It is something He gives, and He

does not give it universally. This is nowhere better seen in our Lord's words in Matthew 11.

"At that time," begins v. 25 of Matthew 11. At what time? Evidently, immediately following our Lord's denunciation of the people in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for their calloused indifference to the presence and power of the Son of God in their midst (vv. 20-24). It would have been easy, even understandable, for Jesus to get discouraged 'at that time.' After all, the very towns in which he was most well-known and performed his greatest miracles had treated him with utter apathy. They simply didn't care. If ever there were a "time" for complaint, this was it. If ever there were a "time" for bitterness and resentment, this was it.

But instead, Jesus gives thanks! He praises the Father! He delights himself in the reassuring fact that God is sovereign, that all things are under divine control, and that nothing, not even the stubborn unbelief of men and women can frustrate His purposes. The world's disdainful response was undoubtedly a source of pain to Jesus, but the Father's sovereign purpose was a more than sufficient remedy. As Bruner has said,

"Somehow and somewhere, behind and above a discouraging world, stands a poised Father, completely in control and utterly unfrustrated. . . . To believe that human beings are the final arbiters of history is inevitably to become a whiner rather than a thanker" (430).

A. The Revelation vv. 25-26

1. The Son's praise v. 25a
2. the Father's purpose v. 25b

The "things" which the Father has "hidden" from some and "revealed" to others would probably include the significance of Jesus' miracles (vv. 20-24), the content of his teaching, who Jesus is, and

especially the knowledge of the Father himself (v. 27). "God's mysterious sovereignty," notes Hagner, "lies behind both belief and unbelief, yet without obviating the culpability of those who fail to believe" (318).

It is an important theological lesson for us to note that our Lord's emphasis in vv. 25-27 on the sovereign initiative of God in both the giving and hiding of revelation does not eliminate or undermine the moral responsibility of people. Indeed, the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum will be held to a higher standard of accountability precisely because they had been given so much but had responded so little. And following this word concerning God's sovereignty in vv. 25-27 there comes an appeal for faith in vv. 28-30.

The "wise and intelligent" are those who, if they had lived up to their reputation for being so learned, should have been the first to acknowledge who Jesus was. The "wise and intelligent" are the self-reliant who are convinced they have no need of divine wisdom. But Jesus isn't excluding smart people from the kingdom. It isn't intellectual power he condemns but intellectual *pride*. Thus "one is to think of the worldly wise, men of secular sophistication who, though sagacious in their own eyes and crafty in their own devices, are yet far from true wisdom" (Davies/Allison, 275). "Infants" or "babes" are those who humbly acknowledge their need for divine mercy. Simply put, the knowledge of God isn't the product of natural law or human logic or chance occurrence. Spiritual understanding doesn't depend on human achievement or IQ or social status or political influence. Rather, it is the fruit of divine illumination.

3. the underlying principle v. 26

Far from bemoaning or finding fault with the Father's sovereign purpose, Jesus rejoiced. "Whatever pleases you, Father, pleases me!"

B. *The Relationship v. 27*

Three incredible claims are made here by Jesus.

1. *Jesus claims to have absolute and universal authority (v. 27a).*
2. *Jesus claims to have a special and altogether unique relationship with God the Father (v. 27b).* See John 5:18; 10:30-31. To "know" is more than mental acquaintance; it is intimate relationship and deep spiritual communion.
3. *Jesus claims that he alone can reveal the Father to others (v. 27c).* "Just as the Son praises the Father for revealing and concealing according to his good pleasure (v. 26), so the Father has authorized the Son to reveal or not according to *his will*" (Carson, 277). Evidently, one of the "things" the Father has given to the Son is the authority to decide to whom the Father shall be revealed!

When the Father finally makes sense to us, when we come to know him truly, to the degree that we grasp something of his nature and will and ways, it is because the Son has graciously stooped to reveal him to us. Our knowledge of God does not come naturally. Neither is it ultimately the product of meticulous research or study. It certainly isn't because we deserve it. It's a gift from his Son. He and he alone is the mediator of the knowledge of God to mankind.

See Mt. 16:17. If one is to know the Son the Father must reveal him. If one is to know the Father the Son must reveal him. *It takes God to know God!*

Our response? Humility! Gratitude! Praise!

Classifying the Attributes

How are we to conceive of and classify the attributes of God?

(1) *The Lutheran model*

According to Francis Pieper, Lutherans opt for one of two approaches: (1) quiescent and operative attributes or (2) negative

and positive attributes. "Those who have employed the first classification define as quiescent those attributes in which no effect upon, and no relation to, the world is implied, but which are conceived as remaining within the Godhead and being apart from the world, such as eternity, simplicity, infinity" (I:435). Operative attributes is the term for all those divine attributes which denote an operation on, or a relation to, this world, such as omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, justice, mercy" (ibid.). Negative attributes include "unity, simplicity, immutability, infinity, immensity, eternity," in other words, the imperfections of creatures cannot be ascribed to God. All those attributes found in man but which are ascribed to God in higher degree or in an absolute sense are known as positive attributes such as life, knowledge, wisdom, holiness, righteousness, truth, power, love, goodness, grace, mercy. Pieper's own list thus appears as follows:

Negative

Unity
 Simplicity
 Immutability
 Infinity
 Omnipresence
 Eternity

Positive

Life
 Knowledge
 Wisdom
 Will
 Holiness
 Justice
 Truthfulness
 Power
 Goodness
 Mercy
 Love
 Grace
 Longsuffering
 Patience

(2) *Arminian-Wesleyan*

H. Orton Wiley (*Christian Theology* [Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1940], I:320-92) uses a three-fold classification: (1) the *absolute* attributes are those which belong to God apart from his creative work, such as spirituality, infinity, eternity, immensity, immutability, perfection; (2) the *relative* attributes are those arising from the relation between Creator and creature and require the existence of the creation itself: omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, wisdom, goodness; and (3) the *moral* attributes which are proper to the relation between God and the moral beings under his government: holiness, love, justice, righteousness, truth, grace.

Thomas Oden (*The Living God* [San Francisco: Harper, 1987], I:50-51) classifies the attributes in terms of *primary* ("those attributes that belong to God's essence apart from God's creative work"), *relational* ("those that arise necessarily out of the relation of God with the created order"), *interpersonal* ("those that arise out of personal and interpersonal analogies, inasmuch as the revelation of God is personal, and human beings, the recipients of revelation, are persons"), and *moral* ("those that arise necessarily out of the relation of personal beings capable of goodness and moral activity").

Primary attributes - Aseity, Independence, Necessity, Oneness, Simplicity, Immensity, Eternality, Incomparable Aliveness

Relational attributes - Omnipresence, Omniscience, Prescience, Foreknowledge, Wisdom, Omnipotence

Interpersonal attributes - Divine Selfhood, Personal Agency, All-Experiencing One, Congruent in Feeling, Sensibility, Emotivity, Affection, Spirituality, Invisibility, Freedom, Will

Moral attributes - Moral Purity, Holiness, Righteousness, Justice, Benevolence, Integrity, Congruence, Veracity, Faithfulness, Persistence, Love, Grace, Mercy, Forbearance

(3) *Reformed*

Ronald Nash argues that an "essential" or "necessary" attribute is one that God could not lose and continue to be God. "Many of the predicates applied to God denote not attributes or essential properties of God but nonessential properties that relate God to His creatures. Relational properties like 'creator', 'ruler', and 'preserver' do not denote divine attributes. A property like 'being Lord of Israel' is likewise a nonessential property. It is logically possible that God might not have had this property. He might never have created Israel, or Israel might never have accepted Yahweh as its God. Being Lord of Israel is not essential to the being of God" (Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* [Zondervan, 1983], 16).

Most refer to the *incommunicable* and *communicable* attributes of God. The former are those to which there is nothing analogous in the creature. The latter are those to which the properties of humanity bear some analogy. Yet, as A. A. Hodge notes, in a certain sense all God's attributes are communicable:

"God is infinite in his relation to space and time; we are finite in our relation to both. But he is no less infinite as to his knowledge, will, goodness, and righteousness in all their modes, and we are finite in all these respects. All God's attributes known to us, or conceivable by us, are communicable, inasmuch as they have their analogy in us, but they are all alike incommunicable, inasmuch as they are all infinite" (*Outlines of Theology* [London: Banner of Truth, 1972], 137).

Here is Louis Berkhof's (*Systematic Theology*) list:

Incommunicable

Self-existence

Immutability

Infinity

Perfection

Eternity

Communicable

Spirituality

Intellectual Attributes

Knowledge

Wisdom

Veracity

Immensity
Unity

Moral Attributes
Goodness
General benevolence
Love
Grace
Mercy
Longsuffering
Holiness
Righteousness
Attributes of Sovereignty
Sovereign will
Sovereign power

Millard Erickson (*Christian Theology*) refers to attributes of *Greatness* and attributes of *Goodness*.

Greatness

Spirituality
Personality
Life (self-existence)
Infinity
Immensity/omnipresence
In relation to time
Omniscience/wisdom
Omnipotence
Constancy (immutability)

Goodness

Moral Purity
Holiness
Righteousness
Justice
Integrity
Genuineness
Veracity
Faithfulness
Love
Benevolence
Grace
Mercy
Persistence

The Glory of God

The Christian world-view is a way of "seeing" and "interpreting" reality through the lens of God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ as found in Scripture. What, then, does the Bible tell us is God's ultimate aim for all that exists and thus the framework within which we must make sense of life?

To put the same question in other terms: What is the pre-eminent passion in God's heart? What is God's greatest pleasure? How does the happiness of God manifest itself? In what does God take supreme delight? I want to suggest that

the pre-eminent passion in God's heart is his own glory. God is at the center of his own affections. The supreme love of God's life is God. God is pre-eminently committed to the fame of his name. God is himself the end for which God created the world. Better, still, God's immediate goal in all he does is his own glory.

God relentlessly and unceasingly creates, rules, orders, directs, speaks, judges, saves, destroys and delivers in order to make known who He is and to secure from the whole of the universe the praise, honor and glory of which He and He alone is ultimately and infinitely worthy. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' At the heart of the Christian world-view is the fact that '-The chief end of God is to glorify God and to enjoy himself forever.'

According to J. I. Packer, "The only answer that the Bible gives to questions that begin: 'Why did God . . .?' is: 'For his own glory?' (Hot Tub Religion, 42). Everything God does is for His own glory. Everything God permits is for His own glory. Everything God pursues is for His own glory. When God acts it is for the sake of His

name. And all this graciously redounds to our happy benefit. To put it more directly, the aim of God in creation and redemption is his delight in our delight in him!

I want to demonstrate this (with help from Jonathan Edwards) by citing a number of important biblical texts.

God: 'the first and the last,' the Alpha and Omega

1. Isa. 44:6 - 'Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.'

2. Isa. 48:12b - 'I am He, I am the first, I am also the last.'

3. Rev. 1:8 - "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'" (see also Rev. 1:17; 21:6; 22:13).

This same idea is found in two other texts.

1. Col. 1:16 - 'For by Him all things were created...all things have been created by Him and for Him.'

2. Heb. 2:10a - 'For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things . . .'

God's glory: the ultimate end of all He does

The term 'glory' refers to the visible splendor or moral beauty of God's manifold perfections. The 'glory' of God is the exhibition of his inherent excellence; it is the external manifestation of his internal majesty. To 'glorify God' is to declare, draw attention to, or publicly announce and advertise his glory. Piper explains that

"another term which can signify much the same thing is 'the name of God.' When Scripture speaks of doing something 'for God's name's

sake' it means virtually the same as doing it 'for his glory.' The 'name' of God is not merely his label, but a reference to his character. The term 'glory' simply makes more explicit that the character of God is indeed magnificent and excellent. This is implicit in the term 'name' when it refers to God" (Desiring God, 227).

Again, there are numerous passages that support this assertion.

1. Rom. 11:36 - 'For from him and through him and to him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.'

According to Edwards, 'the way in which all things are to God, is in being for his glory' (Dissertation, 475). As for Paul's doxological declaration at the end of the verse, "he expresses a joyful consent to God's excellent design in all to glorify himself, in saying, 'to him be glory forever'; as much as to say, as all things are so wonderfully ordered for his glory, so let him have the glory of all, forevermore" (476).

2. Isa. 43:6-7 - "I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made.'

In these places, writes Edwards, 'we see that the glory of God is spoken of as the end of God's saints, the end for which he makes them, i.e., either gives them being, or gives them a being as saints, or both. It is said that God has 'made' and 'formed' them to be his sons and daughters, for his own glory: that they are trees of his planting, the work of his hands, as trees of righteousness that he might be glorified' (476).

Also, this text does not mean that God seeks his own glory as merely a means to the achieving of a yet more ultimate end, namely, the happiness of his people. Rather, in these texts the promises of

happiness for God's people (e.g., in vs. 1-2, 4-7) are so that God may be glorified.

3. Isa. 60:21 - 'Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.'

Again, after noting that vs. 19-20 speak of the blessings of God's people, Edwards points out that 'all the preceding promises are plainly mentioned as so many parts or constituents of the great and exceeding happiness of God's people; and God's glory is mentioned rather as God's end, or the sum of his design in this happiness, than this happiness as the end of this glory' (477).

4. Isa. 61:3 - 'To grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.'

Edwards writes that 'the work of God promised to be effected is plainly an accomplishment of the joy, gladness and happiness of God's people, instead of their mourning and sorrow; and the end in which the work issues, or that in which God's design in this work is obtained and summed up, is his glory. This proves . . . that God's glory is the end of the creation' (477).

Some other texts that identify the end or goal of God's activity as his own glory include the following.

1. Eph. 1:5-6 - 'He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.'

2. 2 Thess. 1:10-12 - 'And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory

of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed - for our testimony to you was believed. To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (see also Isa. 44:23; 49:3; Jn. 17:10).

The moral character and achievements of people are designed ultimately for God's glory

1. Mt. 5:16 - 'Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.'
2. Phil. 1:10-11 - '. . . so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.'
3. Jn. 15:8 - 'By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.'
4. Rom. 15:5-6 - "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."
5. 1 Pet. 2:12 - 'Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.'
6. See also Ps. 22:22-23; Isa. 24:14-16; 25:3; 66:19; Dan. 5:22-23; Rev. 11:13; 14:6-7; 16:9.

Again, God's glory is the ultimate end or goal of particular virtues such as faith (Rom. 4:20; Phil. 2:11), repentance (Josh. 7:19), generosity (2 Cor. 8:19), thanksgiving (Lk. 17:18), and praise (Ps. 50:23). Finally, 1 Cor. 6:19-20 and 10:31 call upon us to seek God's glory in all that we are and all that we do.

Those 'doxological outbursts,' i.e., declarations that 'give vent to the virtuous and pious affections' of the believer's heart

1. Rom. 16:27 - '. . . to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.'
2. Gal. 1:5 - '. . . to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.'
3. Eph. 3:21 - '. . . to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.'
4. Phil. 4:20 - 'Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.'
5. 2 Tim. 4:18 - '. . . to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.'
6. Heb. 13:21 - '. . . through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.'
7. 2 Pt. 3:18 - '. . . but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.'
8. Jude 25 - '. . . to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.'
9. Rev. 1:6 - '. . . to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.'

10. See also 1 Chron. 16:28-29; Ps. 29:1-2; 89:17-18; 57:5; 72:18-19; 115:1; Isa. 42:10-12.

We could also point to descriptions of the angelic host who always seem to be engaged in doxology - Isa. 6:2-3; Lk. 2:14; Rev. 4:9; 4:11; 5:11-14; 7:12. In sum, says Edwards, it is manifest that these holy persons in earth and heaven, in thus expressing their desires [for] the glory of God, have respect to it not merely as a subordinate end, or merely for the sake of something else; but as that which they look upon in itself valuable, and in the highest degree so' (483).

In particular, Edwards comments on the song of praise by the angels regarding the coming of Jesus. They declared to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14). "It must be supposed," says Edwards, "that they knew what was God's last end in sending Christ into the world: and that in their rejoicing on the occasion of his incarnation, their minds would be most taken up with, and would most rejoice in that which was most valuable and glorious in it" (486).

Jesus himself seeks God's glory as his highest end

1. Jn. 7:18 - 'He who speaks from Himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the one who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.'

2. Jn. 12:27-28 - "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour!' But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name. There came therefore, a voice out of heaven: 'I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.'"

Edwards points out that this utterance of Jesus came as he reflected on his impending journey to Jerusalem and the inevitable sufferings he was to face there. He writes:

"Under this distress of mind, in so terrible a view, he supports himself with a prospect of what would be the consequence of his sufferings, viz. God's glory. Now, 'tis the end that supports the agent in any difficult work that he undertakes, and above all others, his ultimate and supreme end. For this is above all others valuable in his eyes; and so, sufficient to countervail the difficulty of the means. That is the end which is in itself agreeable and sweet to him, which ultimately terminates his desires, is the center of rest and support; and so must be the fountain and sum of all the delight and comfort he has in his prospects, with respect to his work" (484).

3. Jn. 17:1 - "These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee.'"

'As this is his first request [in the great prayer of John 17],' notes Edwards, 'we may suppose it to be his supreme request and desire, and what he ultimately aimed at in all. If we consider what follows to the end, all the rest that is said in the prayer seems to be but an amplification of this great request' (484).

4. Jn. 17:4-5 - 'I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.'

5. Jn. 13:31-32 - 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately.'

God's glory is the purpose and end of His redemptive work in Christ

1. Ps. 79:9 (cf. Isa. 44:23) - 'Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; and deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name's sake.'

2. Eph. 1:6,11,14 - '. . . to the praise of the glory of His grace, . . . to the praise of His glory, . . . to the praise of His glory.'

3. Phil. 2:11 - '. . . to the glory of God the Father.'

God's glory is the ultimate end of his providential government of the world

The purpose for the establishment of public worship and the ordinances of the Mosaic Law was to glorify God: 'Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,' says the Lord (Haggai 1:8).

The purpose for the fulfillment of all promises in Christ is the glory of God, as stated in 2 Cor. 1:20 - 'For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.'

The purpose for the execution of divine judgments against the wicked and unbelieving is the glory of God: Ex. 14:17 - 'And as for Me, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.' So also Ezek. 28:22 - ". . . and say, Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am against you, O Sidon, and I shall be glorified in your midst. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I execute judgments in her, and I shall manifest my holiness in her;" and Ezek. 39:13 - "'Even all the people of the land will bury them; and it will be to their renown on the day that I glorify Myself," declares the Lord God.'

The ultimate purpose for Christ's return, the day of the consummation of God's moral government over all His subjects in heaven, on earth, and in hell, is His glory (see 2 Thess. 1:9-10).

God's glory is the end for which the realm of nature was created

1. Ps. 8:1 - 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth, who hast displayed Thy splendor above the heavens.'

2. Ps. 104:31 - 'Let the glory of the Lord endure forever; let the Lord be glad in His works.'

3. Ps. 148:13 - 'Let them [i.e., all aspects of creation] praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven.'

The exaltation and praise of God's name is the end and goal of creation, redemption, indeed, of all that God does

1. 1 Sam. 12:22 - 'For the Lord will not abandon His people on account of His great name, because the Lord has been pleased to make you a people for Himself.'

This declaration by Samuel comes on the heels of the demand made by Israel that God give them a king. Samuel repeatedly reminds them that to demand a king is evil and wicked. He warns them of the disastrous consequences of not being satisfied with God as their king.

Nevertheless, despite their stubbornness in demanding a king, God declares, through Samuel, that He will not abandon them (1 Sam. 12:20-21). Israel is told not to fear. On what basis is this exhortation made? They are not to be afraid, says Samuel, because God will not cast them away. But why will God not cast them away? The answer is: "for His great name's sake." The fundamental reason for God's commitment to His people is His prior commitment to his own name. But why is it that God's commitment to his own name results in his not casting away his people" Look again at v. 22b. The point is that God's name is at stake in your destiny. What happens to you reflects on the glory of God's reputation. That is why he will not cast you away.

2. Ps. 23:3 - 'He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.'

3. Ps. 31:3 - 'For Thou art my rock and my fortress; for Thy name's sake Thou wilt lead me and guide me.'

4. Ps. 109:21 - 'But Thou, O God, the Lord, deal kindly with me for Thy name's sake.'

Edwards points us to several texts in which the purpose for God's having forgiven us is said to be the praise and glory of His name.

1. Ps. 25:7 - 'Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to Thy lovingkindness remember Thou me, for Thy goodness' sake, O Lord.'

2. Ps. 25:11 - 'For Thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great.'

3. Ps. 79:9 - 'Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; and deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name's sake.'

4. Jer. 14:7 - 'Although our iniquities testify against us, O Lord act for Thy name's sake!'

5. 1 Jn. 2:12 - 'I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.'

'These things seem to show,' observes Edwards, 'that the salvation of Christ is for God's name sake. Leading and guiding in the way of safety and happiness, restoring the soul, the forgiveness of sin, and that help, deliverance and salvation that is consequent thereon, is for God's name' (493).

It is also likely that the redemption and deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and then again from Babylon, were types or figures of our redemption and deliverance from sin. If so, we should take note of numerous texts in which the former is said to have occurred for the sake of God's name or glory.

1. 2 Sam. 7:23 - 'And what one nation on the earth is like Thy people Israel, who God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself.'

2. Ps. 106:8 - 'Nevertheless He saved them for the sake of His name, that He might make His power known.'

3. Isa. 63:12 - 'Who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for Himself an everlasting name.'

4. Ezek. 20:9,14,22 - 'But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made Myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt. . . But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, . . . But I withdrew My hand and acted for the sake of My name.'

5. Isa. 48:9, 11 - 'For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, and for My praise I restrain it for you, in order not to cut you off. . . . For my own sake, for My own sake, I will act; for how can My name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another.'

6. Ezek. 36:21-23 - "But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they went. Therefore, say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name. . . . Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight.'"

7. Ezek. 39:25 - 'Therefore thus says the Lord God, 'Now I shall restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel and I shall be jealous for My holy name.'

8. Dan. 9:19 - 'O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Thine own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Thy city and Thy people are called by Thy name.'

Several texts portray the purpose of human virtue and holiness as the glory and praise of God's name.

1. Mt. 19:29 - 'And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.'

2. Rom. 1:5 - '. . . through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake.'

3. 3 Jn. 7 - 'For they went out for the sake of the name.'

4. Rev. 2:3 - '. . . and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.'

Judgments against the wicked are for the sake of God's name.

1. Ex. 9:16 - 'But, indeed, for this cause I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power, and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.'

2. Neh. 9:10 - 'Then Thou didst perform signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants and all the people of his land; for Thou didst know that they acted arrogantly toward them, and didst make a name for Thyself as it is this day.'

God pursues His own glory and praise in all He does

Texts that speak of the goal of God's deeds as the declaration that He alone is God, Lord over all, include 1 Kings 8:59-60; 2 Kings 8:59-60 (Edwards lists 11 additional texts). What we are now going to see is that God acts in a variety of ways to declare himself as alone God, as

alone the Lord, who does such mighty things. In other words, these passages that speak of God acting so that all would know he is God are simply another way of saying God acts for the glory and praise of who he is. There are more than 65 such verses just in the book of Ezekiel that make this point. Permit me to cite only a few.

1. Ezek. 6:7 - "The slain shall fall in your midst, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

2. Ezek. 6:10 - "And they shall know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would bring this calamity upon them."

3. Ezek. 6:13 - "Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain are among their idols all around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountain tops, under every green tree, and under every thick oak, wherever they offered sweet incense to all their idols."

4. Ezek. 6:14 - "So I will stretch out My hand against them and make the land desolate, yes, more desolate than the wilderness toward Diblah, in all their dwelling places. Then they shall know that I am the Lord."

5. Ezek. 7:4 - "My eye will not spare you, Nor will I have pity; But I will repay your ways, And your abominations will be in your midst. Then you shall know that I am the Lord!"

6. Ezek. 7:9 - "My eye will not spare, Nor will I have pity; I will repay you according to your ways. And your abominations will be in your midst. Then you shall know that I am the Lord who strikes."

7. Ezek. 7:27 - "The king will mourn, The prince will be clothed with desolation, and the hands of the common people will tremble. I will do to them according to their way, And according to what they deserve I will judge them; then they shall know that I am the Lord!"

8. Ezek. 11:10 - "You shall fall by the sword. I will judge you at the border of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

9. Ezek. 11:12 - "And you shall know that I am the Lord; for you have not walked in My statutes nor executed My judgments, but have done according to the customs of the Gentiles which are all around you."

10. Ezek. 12:15 - "Then they shall know that I am the Lord, when I scatter them among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries."

11. Ezek. 12:16 - "But I will spare a few of their men from the sword, from famine, and from pestilence, that they may declare all their abominations among the Gentiles wherever they go. Then they shall know that I am the Lord."

12. Ezek. 12:20 - "Then the cities that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall become desolate; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

13. Ezek. 12:25 - "For I am the Lord. I speak, and the word which I speak will come to pass; it will no more be postponed; for in your days, O rebellious house, I will say the word and perform it, says the Lord God."

14. Ezek. 13:9 - "My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of My people, nor be written in the record of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord God."

15. Ezek. 13:14 - "So I will break down the wall you have plastered with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be uncovered; it will fall, and you shall be consumed in the midst of it. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

16. Ezek. 13:21 - "I will also tear off your veils and deliver My people out of your hand, and they shall no longer be as prey in your hand. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

17. Ezek. 13:23 - "Therefore you shall no longer envision futility nor practice divination; for I will deliver My people out of your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

18. Ezek. 14:8 - "I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

19. Ezek. 15:7 - "and I will set My face against them. They will go out from one fire, but another fire shall devour them. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I set My face against them."

20. Ezek. 16:62 - "And I will establish My covenant with you. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

Are 20 texts in the book of Ezekiel alone sufficient to make this point? I certainly hope so. Clearly, God's principal motivation in all he does is to magnify and make known who he is in all his glory. If you desire even greater confirmation of this truth, open your Bible to the book of Ezekiel and read 20:5,7,12,19,20,26,38,42,44; 22:16; 23:49; 24:24,27; 25:5,7,11,17; 26:6; 28:22,23,24,26; 29:6,9,16,21; 30:8,19,25,26; 32:15; 33:29; 34:27; 35:4,9,12,15; 36:11,23,38; 37:6,13; 38:23; and 39:6,7,22,28. God is determined to make his point!

God secures praise for himself in all he does

1. Isa. 43:21 (cf. Isa. 60:6; 66:19) - 'The people whom I formed for Myself, will declare My praise.'

2. 1 Pt. 2:9 - 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.'

Edwards cites an additional 57 texts which assert the same thing!

The Trinity

The concept of the *one* God as a *trinity* of co-equal, yet distinct, persons is the most intellectually taxing and baffling doctrine in Scripture. It is a mystery that is beyond reason yet not contrary to it. Probably the most famous definition of the doctrine of the Trinity is that of St. Augustine (4th-5th century a.d.):

"There are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God, and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely; the Son is the Son uniquely; and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely. All three have the same eternity, the same immutability, the same majesty, and the same power" (*On Christian Doctrine*, transl. By D. W. Robertson, Jr. [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958, p. 10]).

Throughout the course of church history, people have asserted that this concept of God is incoherent and logically contradictory. The doctrine of the Trinity, they argue, is irrational, hardly worthy of intelligent belief. As a result, certain heretical concepts of the Godhead have emerged, the two most notable of which are variants of what was known as **Monarchianism** (also known as *Sabellianism* after one of their leaders, Sabellius [early 3rd century]). In accordance with their name (*monarchy* = single principle, Gk.), the monarchians stressed divine **unity** to the exclusion of any personal distinctions in the Godhead. Monarchians opted for one of two explanations concerning the Son and Holy Spirit.

Dynamic Monarchianism (first advocated by Theodotus, a learned Byzantine leather merchant) conceives of Jesus prior to his baptism as wholly human (the natural born son of Joseph and Mary). As a reward for his exceptional moral virtue, Jesus was *adopted* as God's Son and empowered by the Spirit through which he subsequently performed his miracles. Jesus was "divine" not because of any equality in essence with the Father but by virtue of a received power (*dunamis*). His "divinity", therefore, is *functional* or *ethical*, not *ontological*. This view, also called **Adoptionism**, did not flourish as well as did its sister view.

The most influential spokesman for this view was Paul of Samosata, Metropolitan of Antioch in Syria, who was finally condemned at the synod of Antioch in 268.

Modalistic Monarchianism believed in both the unity of the Godhead and the deity of Christ. The only viable way to maintain both, so they argued, was to identify the Son (and the Spirit) with the Father. There is only one God who, depending on the circumstances, need, and work in which he is engaged, will variously manifest himself either as Father or Son or Spirit. These names do not stand for eternally distinct persons in the Godhead but were simply different functional expressions for the same God. Jesus is one of several *modes* or *phases* or *roles* whereby the one God reveals himself. Thus "Father, Son and Spirit are distinctions that pertain to God in relation to us. The modalists could affirm the economic trinity (a threefoldness in God in relation to the world) but not the ontological or essential trinity (a threefoldness in the inner being of God)" (Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 172).

[Cf. the so-called *Oneness Pentecostals* or *Jesus only Pentecostals*; the UPC.] The Monarchians were also called **Patripassians** by their opponents, because they taught that the Father (Latin, *pater*) suffered (Latin, *passus*) as the Son. Consider these statements by Noetus of Smyrna, one of its most outspoken advocates: "When the Father had not yet been born, He was rightly called the Father; but

when it had pleased him to submit to birth, having been born, He became the Son, He of Himself and not of another” (quoted by Hippolytus in *Refutations*, IX,10). Again, “Christ is himself the Father, and . . . the Father himself was born, He suffered and died” (Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, 1).

A. **Uniting the Three**

Does the doctrine of trinitarianism demand that the Christian perform some sort of special spiritual arithmetic? After all, how can $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$? To answer this, we begin by giving full weight to three lines of evidence in the Bible.

1. Monotheism - That there is but one God is an assertion at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). The apostle Paul is unequivocal in his monotheism: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor. 8:4b; see also 8:5-6). Again, he insists that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). See also Exod. 3:13-15; 15:11; 20:2-3; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5-6; 45:14,18,21-22; 46:9; Zech. 14:9; John 17:3; James 2:19; Rom. 3:30. In summary, there is but one and one God only.

2. *The Deity of Father, Son, Holy Spirit* - We have a problem. There is only one God. But the Father is God. So also is the Son; likewise, the Holy Spirit. How can three be God and yet God be one? There is no escaping the fact that the biblical authors assert both truths. Clearly the Godhead is not an undifferentiated solitary oneness, but a oneness that subsists in multiplicity.

- The Deity of the Father
- The Deity of the Son
- The Deity of the Holy Spirit

[We will examine the evidence for the deity of both Son and Spirit in subsequent lessons. For now we will simply take for granted that the evidence is persuasive.]

3. *Triunity* - Alongside of the biblical testimony that God is one and that three are God is the multitude of texts which in some fashion *unite* the *three* who are God, hence our term *triunity*.

a. Matthew 28:19 - Jesus does not say "baptizing them in the names" (plural), as if there were three Gods, but "in the name" (singular). Neither does he say "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," as if there were one being passing himself off under a threefold name. Rather, the definite article is repeated before each: *the* Father, and *the* Son, and *the* Holy Spirit. Thus, while Jesus distinguishes the three, with equal care he unites them under one name.

b. 2 Corinthians 13:14

c. Ephesians 4:4-6

d. On several occasions the Father, Son, and HS are mentioned together in united activity or purpose relating to the life and ministry of Jesus: at his conception (Lk. 1:35), baptism (Mt. 3:16-17; John 1:33-34), miracles (Mt. 12:28), and ascension (Lk. 24:49).

e. On several occasions the Three are portrayed as united in the work of revelation and redemption: Acts 2:38-39; Rom. 14:17-18; 15:16,30; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 2:18-22; 3:14-19; Col. 1:6-8; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Titus 3:4-6; Heb. 10:29; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 4:2,13-14; Jude 20-21; Rev. 1:4-5.

Therefore, God is one and three are God – Triunity! None of these three lines of evidence can be dismissed nor any one elevated above another. We must embrace them all. But how can they be reconciled?

Although the concept of the Trinity is not explicit in the OT, there are texts in the OT that may allude to the idea of plurality in the Godhead. (1) The standard word for God is *elohim* (plural). (2) Often a plural verb is used with *elohim*. See Gen. 20:13; 35:7; 2 Sam. 7:23. (3) There are also texts where plural pronouns are used of God. See Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8. (4) A few OT texts appear to speak of Yahweh having a "son". See Prov. 30 and Psalm 2. (5) Also relevant are texts that refer to the Messiah. See Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 32:5-6; Micah 5:2. (6) There are numerous texts which speak about the "Spirit" of God. See Gen. 1:1-2; 6:3; Exod. 31:2-3; Num. 24:2; 27:18; Ps. 51; 139:7. These are but a few of the countless texts mentioning the Spirit. (7) There are a few passages where either the name of God or the concept of deity is applied to more than one person. See Isa. 48:16; 61:1; 63:7-14; Haggai 2:4-7.

B. Unity of Essence, Trinity of Personhood

There are only three possible ways to respond to this evidence.

1. The first alternative is to stress the unity of the one God to the exclusion of the full and co-equal deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the doctrine of *Monarchianism* described above. It exists today in two somewhat differing forms:

a. *Unitarianism* - a liberal perspective that denies the deity of Jesus and the Spirit (the Unity School espouses this view).

b. *Oneness Pentecostalism* (the United Pentecostal Church) - a conservative perspective that argues for the deity of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus "only" is God. Or again, there is only one person in the Godhead and his name is Jesus. The "Father" and "Spirit" are only different names appropriate for different manifestations of the one God, Jesus.

2. The second alternative is to stress the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Spirit to such a degree that the result is *Tritheism*, a form of *Polytheism*. The only link among the three is that they share

a common purpose or will. Stress is placed on the *personhood* of each, the essence of which is autonomy and independent self-consciousness. Few embrace this view.

3. The third and, I believe, only legitimate alternative is to accept without alteration both the oneness of God and the full deity of Father, Son, and Spirit. This is done by saying that ***God is one in essence and three in person***. Historic trinitarianism does not assert that God is one and three in the same sense. Rather, that in respect to which God is one is *essence* (or substance), and that in respect to which God is three is *person*. In affirming triunity in God we are saying that God is one in a sense different from the sense in which he is three. We may thus speak about Father, Son, and Spirit both in terms of what is common to all (essence) and what is proper or peculiar to each (person). The Father is the same *God* as the Son and Spirit but not the same *person*. The Son is the same God as the Father and Spirit but not the same person. The Spirit is the same God as the Father and Son but not the same person. Or again, relative to deity, Father, Son, and Spirit are the same. Relative to person, they are distinct.

Be it noted, however, that divine “threeness” is not merely a matter of our perception or experience of God. Threeness belongs to the eternal essence of God no less than divine oneness.

Thus whereas all three persons are God, none of the three has its own *ousia* or essence separate from or independent of the other two. Rather, each person shares equally the numerically one divine substance or essence (*ousia*). Numerically speaking there is only one divine essence and each of the three divine persons coinhere in that one nature. There is, therefore, no ontological subordination within the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Spirit are coequally God in terms of the divine essence. Each person is as fully God as the other. From this, and as a corrective to modalism, John Feinberg concludes that:

“the three persons (*hypostaseis / prosopoi*) coinhering in the one divine nature (*ousia*) exist simultaneously with one another as distinct subsistences or persons. This means that the divine essence is not at one time entirely manifest as the Father (but not in or as the Son or Spirit), and then at another moment manifest exclusively as the Son, and yet again at another time solely as the Spirit. Rather, all three persons . . . exist simultaneously” (*No One Like Him* [Crossway, 2001], 488).

Thus, the Trinitarian relationships as conceived in the western church may be summarized as follows:

∅ ***The Father begets the Son and is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. But, the Father is neither begotten nor does He proceed.***

∅ ***The Son is begotten and is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. But, He neither begets nor proceeds.***

∅ ***The Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son. But, He neither begets nor is He one from whom any proceed.***

Another way of expressing the same thought:

∅ ***The Father is not God from God. The Father is God from whom God exists.***

∅ ***The Son is God from God. The Son is God from whom God exists.***

∅ ***The Spirit is God from God. The Spirit is not God from whom God exists.***

C. **The *Filioque* Controversy**

The Nicene Creed of 325 closes rather abruptly with the phrase, "And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit." In the enlarged form of the creed, traceable to the Council of Constantinople in 381, there is the additional phrase, "the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father." This form of the creed was adopted at Chalcedon in 451. The controversy arose when some in the west (most likely in Spain) began inserting the phrase "and from the Son" (*a patre FILIOQUE procedens*). [They believed this reinforced the Deity of the Son against Arian threats.] It was ratified at the Council of Toledo in 589 and spread rapidly into France, Germany, and was eventually endorsed by Charlemagne.

Orthodox believers regarded this as a violation of the finality and authority of the early ecumenical councils and the wisdom of the Fathers. They also regarded it as theologically untrue and a threat to the doctrine of the Trinity, in at least one of two ways:

(1) On the one hand, it tends to obscure the distinctive characteristics of each person of the Trinity, for whereas both the Son and the Spirit have their source in the Father, the Son alone is begotten of Him and the Spirit alone proceeds from Him. In other words, would not the assertion that the Spirit proceeds from *both* Father and Son tend to fuse the two persons into one and thus resemble modalism? Again, if the Spirit proceeds equally from both, what remains to differentiate the Father from the Son in relation to the Spirit?

(2) On the other hand, it could also point in the opposite direction to ditheism, for it would imply two independent sources (Father and Son) in the Godhead. Only by insisting that the Spirit proceeds alone from the Father (and, at most, *through* the Son) is the proper view of the Trinity maintained.

Part of the rift was pride and politics as much as theological conviction, for the Eastern/Greek church was offended that the Western/Latin church would alter or add to an ecumenical creed without their consent. Whatever the primary cause of the dispute, by

the 9th century the *Filioque* was a permanent part of the Western church's creed and has served as a divisive factor between East and West ever since.

D. **The Search for Analogies**

Several different analogies have been put forth as descriptive of the Trinity. Herman Bavinck mentions a few:

"the three dimensions of space; the three measurements of time; the three kingdoms of nature: matter, spirit, and the union of the two in man; the solid, fluid, and gaseous state; the power of attraction, repulsion, and equilibrium; the three functions of the human soul: reasoning, feeling, and desiring; the three capacities of the soul: mind, will, and moral nature; the three factors that constitute a family: husband, wife, and child; the three classes in society: teachers, soldiery, and peasantry . . . the three tones in music: key-tone, tierce-tone, and quint-tone; the rainbow and its many colors; the sun with its quickening, illumining, and warming energy; the three basic colors: yellow, red, and blue, etc." (*The Doctrine of God*, 323).

As someone once said of the doctrine of the Trinity: "Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind. But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul!"

D. **Conclusion**

What we are saying, then, is that there is a sense in which God is one (essence) and a sense in which God is three (person). The one God exists eternally in three distinct but not independent persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is neither logically contradictory nor inconsistent with Scripture.

Addendum:

Origen on the Eternal Generation of the Son

Origen's conception of the Godhead included both an affirmation of the deity of the Son and an element of subordinationism. Yet, his principal contribution was the notion of the *eternal* generation of the Son, the essence of which is described by Bell:

“Eternal generation means that when the Father put forth or produced or generated the Son, he did not do so in the same way as a woman brings forth a baby, or a bullet comes out of a gun. In both these cases, the action is a *single* action, done once and for all. But when a candle shines and gives forth its light, the light is emitted continually so long as the flame is burning. It is a *continual* act, not a single action, and it is in this way that God the Son is begotten. God the Father continually pours forth God the Son, just as the rational human mind continually generates human will (this is Origen's own analogy), and since God the Father is eternal and has never been without the Son (for Origen learned from St. John that ‘he was with God in the beginning [[Jn 1:2](#)]), so it follows that in the case of God, continual generation is *eternal* generation. From the beginning of eternity to its end, God the Father generates the Son as light forever generates its own radiance (again, the analogy is Origen's own). Light without radiance is unthinkable, says Origen, and more than that, light and its radiance show a community of substance. In other words we have here *light* from light . . . , not trees from light or heat from light or horses from light; but as a river puts forth a stream (water from water) or the rational mind puts forth its will (mind from mind), what is put forth here is the same ‘stuff’ or ‘material’ or ‘substance’ as that which puts it forth. Father and Son, light and splendour, river and stream, mind and will are each *consubstantial*, ‘of the same substance’, and since the Greek word for ‘same’ is *homos* and the Greek word for ‘substance’ is *ousia*, the two terms combine to form the adjective *homo-ousios*” (*A Cloud of Witnesses*, 52).

More recently, John Feinberg has suggested that the church should abandon the doctrines of both the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit. See his discussion in *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 488-492.

The Holiness of God

What does it mean to say that God is holy? Most people think of moral rectitude or righteousness or goodness, and that is certainly true. To be holy is to be characterized by purity and blamelessness and integrity, both in terms of one's essence and one's activity. In this sense, God's holiness and his righteousness are somewhat synonymous. He is described in the OT as "too pure to behold evil" and intolerant of evil (Hab. 1:12-13). But this is only a secondary way in which God is said to be holy. We need to understand the primary thrust of the word.

A. *The Biblical evidence*

God is regularly identified in Scripture as "the Holy One". See Job 6:10; Isa. 40:25; 43:15; Ezek. 39:7; Hosea 11:9; Hab. 1:12; 3:3. He is also called "the Holy One of Israel" in 2 Kings 19:22; Isa. 1:4; 43:3 (a total of 25x in Isaiah alone); Jer. 50:29; 51:5; and elsewhere. In Isa. 57:15 God is described as "the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy." God's holiness is often associated with his majesty, sovereignty, and awesome power (Ex. 15:11-12; 19:10-25; Is. 6:1-4).

Holiness is so much the essence of who God is that Amos speaks of him as swearing "by his holiness" (4:2). This is simply another way of saying that "the Lord God has sworn *by himself*" (6:8). In fact, God's name is qualified by the adjective "holy" in the OT more often than all other qualities or attributes combined!

The root meaning of the Hebrew noun "holiness" (qodes) and the adjective "holy" (qados) comes from a word that means "to cut" or "to separate," and thus to be distinct from and set apart. That the

term did not originally refer to ethical purity is seen from its use in describing prostitutes(!) who were "set apart" or "devoted" to pagan deities such as Baal and Asherah (see Gen. 38:21; Hosea 4:14). Bloesch points out that "in Israel's history holiness could be applied to nonpersonal things, places and even pagan gods (cf. Dan. 4:8,9; 5:11). The ground around the burning bush is holy (Ex. 3:5) as are the temple (Is. 64:11; Jon. 2:4; Hab. 2:20), days (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12; Is. 58:13), utensils (1 Chron. 9:29), garments (Ex. 29:21; Lev. 16:4), food (1 Sam. 21:4; Neh. 7:65), oil (Ex. 30:25,31; Num. 35:25; Ps. 89:20) and offerings (2 Chron. 35:13; Ezek. 42:13)" (God the Almighty, 138).

The Greek equivalent is *hagios* and its derivatives. The point is that God is separate from everyone and everything else. He alone is Creator. He is altogether and wholly other, both in his character and his deeds. He is transcendentally different from and greater than all his creatures in every conceivable respect. To put it in common terms, "God is in a class all by himself."

We often speak of something that is outstanding or has superior excellence as being "a cut above" the rest. That is what God is. As R. C. Sproul put it, "He is an infinite cut above everything else" (*The Holiness of God*, 55). Holiness, then, is not primarily a reference to moral or ethical purity. It is a reference to transcendence. So where does the concept of purity come from? Sproul explains:

"We are so accustomed to equating holiness with purity or ethical perfection that we look for the idea when the word *holy* appears. When things are made holy, when they are consecrated, they are set apart unto purity. They are to be used in a pure way. They are to reflect purity as well as simply apartness. Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it. But the point we must remember is that the idea of the holy is never exhausted by the idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is a ***transcendent purity***" (57; emphasis mine).

Holiness, then, is ***that in virtue of which God alone is God alone. Holiness is moral majesty.*** This unmistakable biblical emphasis on the transcendent inviolability of God runs counter to the tendency in some theological circles to merge God with his creation. **But God's immanence is relational and redemptive, not ontological.** God cannot be identified with his creation, whether it be in the unfolding purpose of history or the religious and psychological experience of people. "His immanence," notes Bloesch, "is an act of his freedom, not a quality of his being. Just as he freely relates to his creation, so he is also free to withdraw himself from his creation" (*God the Almighty*, 24).

This tension between divine transcendence and immanence is seen in an interesting paradox in the title for God, "Holy One of Israel." The words "Holy One" point to God's otherness, his "set-apartness", so to speak. As we shall see, to be holy is to transcendently above the creation. Yet, he is the Holy One "*of Israel*"! He has given himself to a people: they are his people and he is their God. Although transcendent and lofty, he is also immanent and loving. His eternal distinctiveness as God does not prohibit or inhibit him from drawing near in grace and mercy to those with whom he is in covenant relationship.

"For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (Isa. 57:15).

"Thus says the Lord, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where then is a house you could build for me' . . . But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:1-2).

B. ***Holiness as the "mysterium tremendum"***

Earlier this century, German scholar Rudolph Otto wrote a book titled *The Idea of the Holy* in which he described the concept of the holy as the *mysterium tremendum*, or the "awful mystery". Holiness, said Otto, is something which evokes awe and amazement. It draws us, yet frightens us. There is both dread (think of Isaiah's experience) and curiosity (think of Moses' desire to "see God's glory") when one encounters the holy. He writes:

"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures" (pp. 12-13).

See Luke 5:1-8 . . .

C. *An Encounter with the Holiness of God*

The encounter that Isaiah the prophet had with the majestic holiness of God is more instructive than any in Scripture.

1. *Isaiah sees the Lord* (v. 1) - King Uzziah, one of the more godly kings who ruled Judah, died in @ 740 b.c. (see 2 Kings 15:1-7; 2 Chron. 26). He ascended the throne at the age of 16 and ruled for fifty-two years.

One king was dead, but Isaiah was about to make contact with the King who never dies. One king had lost his power. Another never will. One king has seen his authority pass to the next generation. Another will rule from generation to generation. An earthly nation mourns the passing of its monarch. A heavenly nation praises the perpetuity of its monarch's reign. Uzziah's power was limited and fleeting. God's power is limitless and forever. Needless to say, the contrasts in v. 1 are striking. Oswalt elaborates on this point:

"Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon. He had been an efficient administrator and an able military leader. Under his leadership Judah had grown in every way (2 Chr. 26:1-15). He had been a true king. How easy it must have been to focus one's hopes and trust upon a king like that. What will happen, then, when such a king dies, and coupled with that death there comes the recognition that a resurgent Assyria is pushing nearer and nearer? In moments like that it is easy to see the futility of any hope but an ultimate one. No earthly king could help Judah in that hour. In the context of such a crisis, God can more easily make himself known to us than when times are good and we are self-confidently complacent" (177).

One day, most likely while in the temple, Isaiah "saw the Lord." *Lord* here is usually printed in our Bibles as "Lord" as over against "LORD". The former is a translation of the word *Adonai* which means "the sovereign one." The latter is a translation of *Yahweh* which is the most sacred name of God, the name by which he reveals himself to his covenant people.

The name *Jehovah* is not technically a biblical one. It comes from the consonants in *Yahweh* and the vowels in *Adonai*. For example, we read in Ps. 8:1 - "O LORD [*Yahweh*] our Lord [*Adonai*], how excellent is thy name in all the earth." *LORD* is the name of God while *Lord* is his title.

2. *Isaiah sees the angels* (vv. 2-4) - This is the only place in Scripture where the *seraphim* are mentioned. The word literally means "burning ones" and is applied elsewhere to serpents (Num. 21:6; Isa. 14:29; 30:6).

a. *their posture* (v. 2) - They covered their faces/eyes, for even among the angels it is forbidden to gaze directly at the glory of God. As Motyer put it, "They covered their eyes, not their ears, for their task was to receive what the Lord would say, not to pry into what he is like" (76). They cover their feet, perhaps an allusion to Moses' experience of being on "holy ground." Others have suggested it points to their humility. Still others argue that since it is our feet that connect us to the earth, they are symbolic of our creatureliness. Although angels are not earthbound or human, they acknowledge their status as mere creatures in the presence of the Creator. According to Motyer, "in covering their feet they disavowed any intention to choose their own path; their intent was to go only as the Lord commanded" (76).

In the OT, "feet" is sometimes used as a euphemism for genitalia (cf. Ruth 3:4,7,8). The suggestion has been made that "as the creature should not look upon the Creator, so the created should not be displayed in the sight of the Creator" (Oswalt, 179). However, it seems unlikely that "angelic" beings who do not reproduce should be portrayed as having reproductive organs.

b. *their praise* (vv. 3-4) - Holiness is the only "attribute" of God raised to the third power! Some have argued that it implies triunity, one "holy" for each person of the Godhead. Most likely the *Trisagion*, as it has come to be known, is simply an example of a Hebrew literary device in which repetition is used for the sake of great emphasis (cf. Gen. 14:10; 2 Kings 25:15). Note several things:

First, he is the Lord of "hosts," a reference to his military role. God is the warrior who engages the enemies of his people. He stands at the

head of a mighty heavenly host, an army of angelic powers against whom no one can stand.

Second, although God is holy and therefore transcendent, he is not remote. The infinite loftiness of God, implied by the reference to his holiness, does not entail his aloofness. God is great but he is not geographically distant. Observe the three-fold emphasis on "fulness" or God's "filling" the temple and the earth (vv. 1,3,4). This thrice-holy God is intimately near those who love him.

Third, the impact is shattering! There is trembling (cf. Ex. 19:18; Acts 4:31) and the presence of smoke (Isa. 4:5; Ex. 33:9). The latter may be the smoke of incense, "in which case smell is added to sight and sound as the sensory elements of the experience" (Oswalt, 182). R. C. Sproul comments:

"A recent survey of ex-church members revealed that the main reason they stopped going to church was that they found it boring. It is difficult for many people to find worship a thrilling and moving experience. We note here, when God appeared in the temple, the doors and the thresholds were moved. The inert matter of doorposts, the inanimate thresholds, the wood and metal that could neither hear nor speak had the good sense to be moved by the presence of God" (40-41).

What is important to remember is that ***we are now the temple of God!*** If the inanimate structure of the old covenant trembled and shook at God's presence, what is *our* response, we ***in whom*** this same glorious and holy God now lives? How can there be the slightest indifference or coldness or routine or mere ritual or mindless habit in our worship when this same God lives and abides in us?

3. *Isaiah sees himself* (vv. 5-7) - Seeing God does not produce rapture or giddiness or religious flippancy. It produces terror and self-loathing. Isaiah does not respond with pride or elitism, boasting

that he alone has experienced this wonderful privilege. Rather he is undone! He sees himself as insufferably unrighteous compared to the resplendent purity and transcendence of the King. As someone has rightly said,

"We, in our arrogance, measure sin by its effects within the created order and upon us. Isaiah sees more clearly: sin is to be measured by the majesty and purity of the One against Whom it is necessarily perpetrated" (F. Seay).

Isaiah's experience is instructive in another respect. This man was already aware of his sinfulness and had made great strides in his growth in spiritual things. But now, in the unmediated presence of the Holy God, he sees himself as filthier than ever before.

So intensely aware is he of his sin that he, in effect, calls down the curse of God on his own head. "Woe is me" is a cry of judgment. It is a cry of anathema. "It is one thing for a prophet to curse another person in the name of God [as Isaiah had done in 5:8,11,18,20,21]; it was quite another for a prophet to put that curse upon himself" (Sproul, 43). This no small twinge of a sensitive conscience. Isaiah cries out: "I am *ruined*," i.e., "I am coming apart at the seams! I am unraveling. I am experiencing personal disintegration!"

"If ever there was a man of integrity, it was Isaiah Ben Amoz. He was a whole man, a together type of a fellow. He was considered by his contemporaries as the most righteous man in the nation. He was respected as a paragon of virtue. Then he caught one sudden glimpse of a Holy God. In that single moment all of his self-esteem was shattered. In a brief second he was exposed, made naked beneath the gaze of the absolute standard of holiness. As long as Isaiah could compare himself to other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his own character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed - morally and spiritual annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed" (Sproul, 43-44).

His sudden sense of sinfulness and personal ruin was linked to his lips. He cried out, in essence, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because ***I've got a dirty mouth!***" Why the focus on his "mouth"? I don't think there is any reason to conclude that Isaiah was guilty of profanity or told dirty jokes! Instead, there are two reasons for this conviction on his part. First, mention is made of his mouth because what we say betrays what we are. The mouth is like a phonograph speaker, it simply manifests what is impressed on the record of the heart (see Mt. 15:11,18 and James 3:2,6-12).

But more important still is the fact that the one area in his life which Isaiah thought he had under control, in which he no doubt prided himself, because of which the people honored and respected him, because of which he was highly esteemed, because of which he had position and prestige was the *power of his mouth*. He was a prophet! If there was one arena in his life of which he had no fear or concern, related to which he felt God's most overt approval, which he regarded as his greatest strength and that which was above reproach and beyond falling or failure . . . was his tongue! His speech! His mouth! His verbal ministry! He was God's mouthpiece! He was God's voice, His spokesman on the earth! *Yet the first thing he felt was the sinfulness of his speech!*

Oswald Chambers once wrote that "An unguarded strength is a double weakness." Beware of that in your life which you regard as invulnerable to attack, failure, or demonic assault. At this point Isaiah must have felt hopeless. He

"was groveling on the floor. Every nerve fiber in his body was trembling. He was looking for a place to hide, praying that somehow the earth would cover him or the roof of the temple would fall upon him, anything to get him out from under the holy gaze of God. But there was nowhere to hide. He was naked and alone before God. He had no Eve to comfort him, no fig leaves to conceal him. His was pure moral anguish, the kind that rips out the heart of a man and

tears his soul to pieces. Guilt, guilt, guilt. Relentless guilt screamed from his every pore" (Sproul, p. 46).

But here is the good news of the gospel: **The infinitely holy God is also a gracious and merciful God!** This God of mercy immediately provides cleansing and forgiveness. Isaiah's wound was being cauterized. The dirt in his mouth was washed away as the corruption of his heart was forgiven. He was refined by holy fire. The fact that the coal was placed on his lips points to the principle that "God ministers to the sinner at the point of confessed need.'

The fact that the coal was placed on his lips points to the principle that "God ministers to the sinner at the point of confessed need" (Motyer, 78).

It should also be noted that "Isaiah does not plead for mercy, nor does he make great vows if God will but deliver him. All of the evidence makes it appear that he considers his case hopeless. Yet out of the smoke comes a seraph with a purifying coal. God does not reveal himself to destroy us, but rather to redeem us" (Oswalt, 184). In other words, Isaiah is redeemed and forgiven at *God's initiative*, not his own.

4. *Isaiah sees his mission* (vv. 8-13) - "Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God's service?" (Oswalt, 186).

The practical implications of this vision of divine holiness are immense. Personal transformation is the product, not so much of seeing the ugliness of sin as seeing the beauty of the Savior. Isaiah was awakened to the horror of his sin only because he saw the holiness of his God. Nothing on earth in the course of what must have been a full and fascinating life had ever awakened Isaiah to the presence and depth of his sin the way this experience did. No

teaching he had received, no exhortation from parent or friend or colleague, no warning about verbal sins, . . . nothing had brought him the quality of conviction that truly transforms. It was only when he saw the indescribably surpassing and incomparable character of God that his heart was stung with the anguish of conviction. Personal holiness thus begins with an awareness of who God is. Perhaps that's why so few people are or care to be holy: they've never "seen" God, they know little if anything of the magnitude of his holy majesty, his infinite, uncreated righteousness.

Awareness of who God is leads inevitably to an awareness of who we are. Self-image, the concept we have of ourselves, must begin not by looking in the mirror but by looking into the face of God. Few have expressed this more cogently than John Calvin (1509-64), who insisted that no one ever achieves

"a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy --- this pride is innate in all of us [even in Isaiah, I might add] ---unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured" (*Institutes*, Book One I:2).

Calvin concludes that man is never sufficiently "touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state, until he has compared himself with God's majesty" (I:3).

This self-awareness in turn inevitably leads to brokenness and pain, followed by confession and repentance. One need only reflect on the emotional spiritual anguish of Isaiah. His physical agony was but a portrait of his spiritual discomfiture. True knowledge of God always leads to repentance. This in turn leads to cleansing and forgiveness. The holiness of God that first hurts, then heals. Finally, cleansing

leads to commissioning. Mercy leads to ministry. Having seen God, what else is there to say but: "Here am I [Lord]. Send me" (Isa. 6:8).

The Omnipotence of God

A highly simplistic definition of "power" would be that it is the ability to produce effects, or to accomplish what one wills. The Scriptures clearly affirm not only that God has such an ability but that he has it without limitations. Hence, we speak of God as being *omnipotent*, infinite in power.

His "power is vast" (Job 9:4). He is "the Lord strong and mighty" (Ps. 24:8), "great and awesome" (Deut. 7:21), "the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel" (Isa. 1:24). "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the father's sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the Lord Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds" (Jer. 32:17-19a). Creation is a testimony to "his great power and mighty strength" (Isa. 40:26). He is Lord, Owner, Ruler, and King of all creation, whom none can resist or overpower (Matt. 11:25; Rev. 1:8; Ps. 29:10; Jer. 10:7,10). He is "the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 4:8; 11:17), "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Nothing is too difficult for him; all things are within his power (Gen. 18:14; Zech. 8:6; Jer. 32:27).

When Mary asked Gabriel how she, a virgin, could conceive a child without the involvement of a man, his response was: "*For nothing will be impossible with God.*" After comparing the difficulty of a rich man getting into heaven with a camel passing through the eye of a

needle, Jesus said: *"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

"But our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Ps. 115:3).

"Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps" (Ps. 135:6).

"For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for his stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27).

"Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:10).

"Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted'" (Job 42:1-2).

"And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off his hand or say to him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

See also 2 Chron. 20:6; Job 23:13; Prov. 21:30; Isa. 43:13.

A. Power without Limit

We must remember that divine power is *optional* in its exercise. Whereas God is infinitely powerful in his eternal being, it is not necessary or an essential part of this attribute that he always and in every way exercise his power. As William G. T. Shedd explains,

"God need not have created anything. And after creation, he may annihilate. Only when he has bound himself by promise, as in the

instance of faith in Christ, does his action cease to be optional" (*Dogmatic Theology*, I:359).

It is also important to note that God accomplishes his will in one of two ways.

(1) He accomplishes much by *appointed means*, i.e., by the uniform and ordered operation of what are called *second causes*. This would include God's providential activity in which he makes use of existing things. God utilizes what we erroneously call "laws of nature" to carry out his purpose (e.g., sustaining human life by means of food and water, providing warmth for our atmosphere via the heat of the sun, etc.).

(2) God also accomplishes much by divine fiat, i.e., directly and immediately without the use of means or secondary causes. Creation, for example, as well as certain miracles (such as the resurrection) are expressions of this kind of divine power. They are actions which are the operation of the first cause (God) alone.

It is also the case that the *actual* exercise of God's power does not represent its limits. God *can* do all he wills (and does) but *need not do all he can* (and does not). That is to say, God's infinite power is manifested in the works of creation, but is not exhausted by them. God could have created more than he has, if he so pleased. What God *has* done, therefore, is no measure of what he *could* have done or can do.

B. Power without Self-Contradiction

Can God do anything and everything? Certain medieval theologians and later philosophers such as Rene Descartes argued that God has an absolute power that is free from, indeed often contradictory to, all reason and morality (God is *ex lex*, outside of or beyond law) . Thus, they concluded that God can sin, lie, and die, among other things. He is not only able to do all he wills, but he is able also to will everything, even the logically contradictory. Most theologians,

however, have pointed to several texts of Scripture that indicate otherwise:

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb. 6:17-18).

"If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for **he cannot deny himself**" (2 Tim. 2:13).

"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For **God cannot be tempted by evil**, nor does he tempt anyone" (Js. 1:13).

Charles Hodge, 19th century Princeton theologian, makes this observation:

"It is . . . involved in the very idea of power, that it has reference to the production of possible effects. It is no more a limitation of power that it cannot effect the impossible, than it is of reason that it cannot comprehend the absurd, or of infinite goodness that it cannot do wrong. It is contrary to its nature. Instead of exalting, it degrades God, to suppose that He can be other than He is, or that He can act contrary to infinite wisdom and love. When, therefore, it is said that God is omnipotent because He can do whatever He wills, it is to be remembered that His will is determined by His nature. ***It is certainly no limitation to perfection to say that it cannot be imperfect***" (*Systematic Theology* I:409).

These would appear to be those things God *cannot* do: (1) the logically contradictory (God's *inability* to be illogical is prevented by his truth, righteousness, faithfulness, etc.); (2) immoral actions (again, because of his moral excellency and consistency); (3) actions appropriate to finite creatures; (4) actions denying his own nature as God; and (5) the alteration of his eternal plan.

Augustine concurs: "God is omnipotent, and yet he cannot die, he cannot lie, he cannot deny himself. How is he omnipotent then? He is omnipotent for the very reason that he cannot do these things. For if he could die, he would not be omnipotent."

But how is it that to say God *cannot* do something is power, and to say God *can* do something else is weakness? Augustine answers:

"The power of God is not diminished when it is said that he cannot die, and cannot sin; for if he could do these things, his power would be less. A being is rightly called omnipotent, from doing what he wills, and not from suffering what he does not will."

What Augustine is saying is this: to be able to do all that one wills to do is to be omnipotent. But to be unable to do what one does *not* will to do is not weakness, for power is the ability to do one's will, not the ability to do what is not one's will. Ronald Nash puts it yet another way:

"The power to sin is the power to fall short of perfection. Since this is the opposite of omnipotence, God's inability to sin is not inconsistent with His omnipotence; rather, it is entailed by His omnipotence" (40).

Whereas both Hodge and Augustine are correct, in yet another sense it must be said that God *can*, in fact, do everything. When I say God can do everything, someone will respond by pointing out that God cannot do the logically absurd or self-contradictory. For example, this objector would say: "God cannot create a round triangle!" But a "round triangle" is a non-entity, a nothing. To say that "something" is round at the same time and in the same sense in which it is triangular is to utter a contradiction. Such contradictions do not exist, indeed cannot exist, in fact cannot even be conceived as existing. It is, of course, possible to conceive of the *proposition*, "Here is a round triangle." But it is not possible to conceive of a "round triangle" as actually existing. If you think you can conceive of

one, describe it to me. What does a round triangle look like? What are its properties? Therefore, God's supposed "inability" to create a round triangle is not a result of his being limited by uncreated conditions in the universe. Rather, it is an inability to do nothing, since that is precisely what a round triangle is: nothing! And to say that God is unable to do a "nothing" is a meaningless assertion. Consequently, God can do *everything*, for "round triangles" are not "things" subject to being done. Thus, Carl F. H. Henry concludes:

"That God will not alter his own nature, that he cannot deny himself, that he cannot lie and cannot sin, that he cannot be deceived, and that, moreover, he cannot die, are affirmations which historic Christian theology has always properly associated with divine omnipotence and not with divine limitation or divine impotency, because the 'possibility' as stated is a logical impossibility. Any conception of omnipotence that requires God to contradict himself reflects a conjectural and ridiculous notion of absolute power" (*God, Revelation, Authority*, V:319).

The objection that this puts God in subservience to the laws of logic, as if to say he is restricted by something external to himself, fails to realize that the laws of logic are simply the way God thinks. The so-called "laws of logic" are the organization of the divine mind.

Let us apply the preceding to the age-old conundrum: ***can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift?***

"If God can create the stone too heavy for God to lift, there is something God cannot do (namely, lift the stone). And if God cannot create the stone too heavy for him to lift, there is still something he cannot do (in this case, create the stone). Either God can or cannot create such a stone. Therefore, in either case, there is something God cannot do; and in either case, we seem forced to conclude that God is not omnipotent" (Ronald Nash, 47).

But again, for this objection to hold, it must propose a "thing," a genuine "task" for God to do. But it does not. The request that "*the Being who can do anything, which includes creating and lifting all stones, create a stone too heavy to be lifted by the Being who can lift any created thing*" is incoherent. It proposes nothing. It is a pseudo-task. That is to say, *a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones* is contradictory. Likewise, for God to create something which is a nothing (namely, a stone too heavy to be lifted by him who can lift all stones), is contradictory. That God cannot create a stone which logically cannot be created is no more a threat to omnipotence than his alleged "inability" to create a round triangle. Thus, praise be to God who can do all things!

C. Practical Implications

1. *A reason to praise* - Stephen Charnock explains:

"Wisdom and power are the ground of the respect we give to men; they being both infinite in God, are the foundation of a solemn honour to be returned to him by his creatures. If a man make a curious engine, we honour him for his skill; if another vanquish a vigorous enemy, we admire him for his strength; and shall not the efficacy of God's power in creation, government, redemption, inflame us with a sense of the honour of his name and perfections! We admire those princes that have vast empires, numerous armies, that have a power to conquer their enemies, and preserve their own people in peace; how much more ground have we to pay a mighty reverence to God, who, without trouble and weariness, made and manages this vast empire of the world by a word and beck! What sensible thoughts have we of the noise of thunder, the power of the sun, the storms of the sea! These things, that have no understanding, have struck men with such a reverence that many have adored them as gods. What reverence and adoration doth this mighty power, joined with an infinite wisdom in God, demand at our hands" (Charnock, 429).

2. *A warning to the rebellious* - Divine omnipotence is an ominous warning to those who think they somehow can resist God's judgment. "How foolish is every sinner," writes Charnock. "Can we poor worms strut it out against infinite power?" Oh, that every obstinate sinner

"would think of this, and consider his unmeasurable boldness in thinking himself able to grapple with omnipotence! What force can any have to resist the presence of him before whom rocks melt, and the heavens at length shall be shrivelled up as a parchment by the last fire! As the light of God's face is too dazzling to be beheld by us, so the arm of his power is too mighty to be opposed by us" (437).

3. *A comfort to the saved* - God's omnipotence is a comfort to us when we are persecuted and oppressed (Ps. 27:1). It is a comfort and encouragement to us when we are tempted (1 Cor. 10:13). It is especially a comfort to us when we pray, for it reassures us that God is altogether able to do what we ask. See Eph. 3:20-21. Here are John Stott's comments:

"(1) He is able to *do* or to work, for he is neither idle nor inactive, nor dead. (2) He is able to do what we *ask*, for he hears and answers prayer. (3) He is able to do what we ask *or think*, for he reads our thoughts, and sometimes we imagine things for which we dare not and therefore do not ask. (4) He is able to do *all* that we ask or think, for he knows it all and can perform it all. (5) He is able to do *more . . . than (hyper, 'beyond')* all that we ask or think, for his expectations are higher than ours. (6) He is able to do much more, or *more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he does not give his grace by calculated measure. (7) He is able to do very much more, *far more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he is a God of superabundance" (139-40).

The Sovereignty of God

A. Over Nature and Weather

Psalms 104; 105:16; 135:7; 147:7-20; 148; Job 9:5-10; 26:5-14; 37:1-24; 38:8-38; Mark 4:39,41. Other texts:

"It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and brings out the wind from His storehouses" (Jer. 10:12-13).

"Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? Or can the heavens grant showers? Is it not Thou, O Lord our God? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things" (Jer. 14:22).

"And furthermore [declares the Lord], I withheld the rain from you while there were still three months until harvest. Then I would send rain on one city and on another city I would not send rain; one part would be rained on, while the part not rained on would dry up" (Amos 4:7).

B. Over Kings and Nations

Daniel 1:2 (cf. Jer. 25:1-12; Isa. 10:5-14)

"the Lord gave" . . . Ultimately it was neither the sin and weakness of Jehoiakim nor the brilliance and strength of Nebuchadnezzar, not even the impotence or inactivity of God, but the sovereign good pleasure of Yahweh that determined the historical outcome (cf. Dan. 2:20-23). The Israelites "are not mere pawns on a political and

geographical chessboard. To be in the hand of Nebuchadnezzar is not to be out of the control of God" (Goldingay, 22).

See also Daniel 2:37-38; 4:25,30,32; 5:18,20,21; Isaiah 10:5-13; 40:23-24

C. Over People and their Hearts

Gen. 20:6; Prov. 21:1; 16:9; Exodus 3:21-22; 12:35-36; 34:23-24; Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Ezra 1:1,5; 6:22; 7:27; Isa. 45:4-5; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

D. Over the Closing and Opening of the Womb

Gen. 16:2; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:5; Judges 13:3.

E. Over Everything (including evil) in General

Genesis 50:20 (cf. Ps. 105:17); Exodus 4:11 (disease and disability); Job 2:10 (cf. James 5:11); 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Prov. 16:33; 21:31; Isa. 45:7 (virtually all of Isa. 42-48); Lam. 3:37-38; Daniel 4:32,35; Amos 3:6; Matthew 10:29-31; Acts 4:27-28; Eph. 1:11; 2 Cor. 12:7.

F. Over Life and Death

Deut. 32:39; 2 Samuel 12:15; James 4:14-15; 1 Samuel 2:6-7.

G. Over Destructive Animals

When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, 2 Kings 17:25 says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them."

And in Daniel 6:22, Daniel says to the king, "My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths." Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. Which means that all calamities that are owing to animal

life are ultimately in the control of God. He can see a pit bull break loose from his chain and attack a child; and he could, with one word, command that its mouth be shut. Similarly he controls the invisible animal and plant life that wreaks havoc in the world: bacteria and viruses and parasites and thousands of microscopic beings that destroy health and life. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills.

H. *Divine Sovereignty in Proverbs*

1. *over all our actions and words* (16:1-3,9) - For all its emphasis on common sense, Proverbs exalts faith above wisdom; and for all its emphasis on prudence, man's ways are determined by divine providence.

Note esp. vv. 2,9. "God holds an even balance and critically tests the genuineness of the impulses which motivated the deed. Accordingly, man should not be guided by his own judgment but apply the criterion, how will it be judged by God?" (Cohen, 103).

In v. 3, "works" refers not to those already performed, but "projected actions" or "plans", as in vv. 1-2. See 19:21. "To confide one's projects to Yahweh implies an element of resignation to Yahweh's will, a willingness to give up anything which clashes with Yahweh's resolve and so a quest for attunement and harmony. This is the way for man to proceed if he wishes to ensure that his plans will not be nullified by Yahweh's veto and so fail of implementation" (McKane, 497).

As for v. 9, "a man may plan his road to the last detail, but he cannot implement his planning unless it coincides with Yahweh's plan for him. He is deluded if he supposes that he has unfettered control and can impose his will on every situation without limitation in order to make his plan a reality, for it is Yahweh who orders his steps" (McKane, 495-96).

2. *over the destiny of the wicked* (16:4) - There are no loose ends in God's providential rule of the world: even the wicked are under his oversight. Note well: there is a difference between making a person to condemn him/her, and appointing a person to condemnation for his/her wickedness. God has appointed all things and all people to their proper end that he might receive all the glory.

3. *over the casting of the lot* (16:33) - The casting of lots was often used in the OT to determine God's will. See Lev. 16:7-10,21,22; Joshua 7:14 (cf. 1 Sam. 14:42); 14:2; 18:6; 1 Chron. 6:54ff.; 25:7,8; 26:13ff; Neh. 10:34ff. See also Matt. 27:35; Acts 1:26. Although the decision is reached by a seemingly arbitrary process, God is in absolute control. As someone said, "Man throws the dice, but God makes the spots turn up!"

4. *over the heart of the king* (21:1) - In much the same way that an irrigator might cut a watercourse in any direction he desires, so God sways the heart of a king, even an unbelieving one. See Gen. 20:6; Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 9:16; 10:1-2; 14:4-5; Isaiah 10:5-19; 45:1-13; Ezra 1:1,5 (Cyrus, king of Persia); Jer. 25:3-14; Hab. 1:5-11; Acts 4:25-28; Rev. 17:16-17.

5. *over the battle and its outcome* (21:30-31) - See also Ps. 20:7; 33:13-17; Isa. 31:1-3.

6. *over our souls* (24:12c; 18:10; 30:5b)

This is why Charles Spurgeon, the London pastor from 100 years ago said,

"I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes - that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens - that the chaff from the hand of the winnow is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating

pestilence - the fall of . . . leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

When Spurgeon was challenged that this is nothing but fatalism and stoicism, he replied,

"What is fate? Fate is this - *Whatever is, must be*. But there is a difference between that and Providence. Providence says, *Whatever God ordains, must be*; but the wisdom of God never ordains anything without a purpose. Everything in this world is working for some great end. Fate does not say that. . . . There is all the difference between fate and Providence that there is between a man with good eyes and a blind man."

Is God the Author of Sin?

Jonathan Edwards answers, "If by 'the author of sin,' be meant the sinner, the agent, or the actor of sin, or the *doer* of a wicked thing . . . it would be a reproach and blasphemy, to suppose God to be the author of sin. In this sense, I utterly deny God to be the author of sin." But, he argues, willing that sin exist in the world is not the same as sinning. God does not commit sin in willing that there be sin. God has established a world in which sin will indeed necessarily come to pass by God's permission, but not by his "positive agency."

God is, Edwards says, "the permitter . . . of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted . . . will most certainly and infallibly follow."

He uses the analogy of the way the sun brings about light and warmth by its essential nature, but brings about dark and cold by dropping below the horizon. "If the sun were the proper cause of cold and darkness," he says, "it would be the fountain of these things, as it is the fountain of light and heat: and then something might be argued from the nature of cold and darkness, to a likeness of nature in the sun." In other words, "sin is not the fruit of any positive agency

or influence of the most High, but on the contrary, arises from the withholding of his action and energy, and under certain circumstances, necessarily follows on the want of his influence."

Thus in one sense God wills that what he hates come to pass, as well as what he loves. Edwards says,

"God may hate a thing as it is in itself, and considered simply as evil, and yet . . . it may be his will it should come to pass, considering all consequences. . . . God doesn't will sin as sin or for the sake of anything evil; though it be his pleasure so to order things, that he permitting, sin will come to pass; for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence. His willing to order things so that evil should come to pass, for the sake of the contrary good, is no argument that he doesn't hate evil, as evil: and if so, then it is no reason why he may not reasonably forbid evil as evil, and punish it as such."

Why Does God Ordain that there Be Evil?

It is evident from what has been said that it is not because he delights in evil as evil. Rather he "wills that evil come to pass . . . that good may come of it." What good? And how does the existence of evil serve this good end? Here is Edwards' stunning answer:

"It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . ."

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and

punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect.'

The Immutability of God

The importance of defining our theological terms with precision is most evident in the case of divine immutability. Here is a word which in contemporary evangelical circles evokes either protest or praise. Some see it as a threat to the biblical portrait of God who does indeed change: He changes His mind ("repents") and He changes His mode

of being ("the Word became flesh"). Others are equally concerned that a careless tampering with this attribute of God will reduce Him to a fickle, unfaithful, and ultimately unworthy object of our affection and worship. It is imperative, therefore, that we proceed cautiously, and yet with conviction, in the explanation of the sense in which God both can and cannot change.

A. *Immutability as Consistency of Character*

The immutability of God is related to, but clearly distinct from, His eternity. In saying that God is eternal, in the sense of everlasting, we mean that He always has and always will exist. He was preceded by nothing and shall be succeeded by nothing. In saying that God is immutable we mean that He is consistently the same in His eternal being. The Being, who eternally is, never changes.

This affirmation of unchangeableness, however, is not designed to deny *that there is change and development in God's **relations** to His creatures.*

- We who were once His enemies are now by the grace of Christ His friends (Rom. 5:6-11).
- The God who declared His intention to destroy Nineveh for its sin "changed" His mind upon its repentance (more on this later).
- Furthermore, this affirmation of immutability must not be interpreted in such a way that the reality of the "Word become flesh" is threatened (John 1:14). We must acknowledge (our salvation depends upon it) that He who is in His eternal being very God became, in space-time history, very man. Yet the Word who became flesh did not cease to be the Word (no transubstantiation here!). The second person of the Trinity has taken unto Himself or assumed a human nature, yet without alteration or reduction of His essential deity. He is now what He has always been: very God. He is now what He once was not: very man. He is now and forever will be both: the

God-man. It is a simplistic and ill-conceived doctrine of immutability that denies any part of this essential biblical verity.

Thus, to say without qualification that God cannot change or that He can and often does change is at best unwise, at worst misleading. Our concept of immutability must be formulated in such a way that we do justice to every biblical assertion concerning both the "being" and "becoming" of God.

Clearly, then, to say that God is immutable is not to say that He is immobile or static, for whereas all change is activity, not all activity is change. It is simply to affirm that God always is and acts in perfect harmony with the revelation of Himself and His will in Scripture.

- For example, Scripture tells us that God is good, just, and loving. Immutability, or constancy, simply asserts that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love as the appropriate response on the part of the Deity, that is precisely what God will be (or do, as the case maybe). To say the same thing, but negatively, if God ought to be good, just, or loving as the circumstances may demand, or as his promises would require, He will by no means ever be evil, unfair, or hateful.

- Immutability means that the God who in Scripture is said to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, has not, is not, and never will be under any and all imaginable circumstances, localized, ignorant, or impotent. What He is, He always is.

To be more specific, God is immutable in respect to His

(1) *essential being* (God can neither gain nor lose attributes);

(2) *life* (God neither became nor is becoming; His life never began nor will it ever end);

(3) *moral character* (God can become neither better nor worse); and

(4) *purpose or plan* (God's decree is unalterable).

We shall now consider each of these in turn.

B. *Constancy of Being, Life, Character, and Plan*

1. *The immutability of God's Being* - Immutability is a property which belongs to the divine essence in the sense that God can neither gain new attributes, which he didn't have before, nor lose those already his. To put it crudely, *God doesn't grow*. There is no increase or decrease in the Divine Being, If God increases (either quantitatively or qualitatively), he was, necessarily, incomplete prior to the change. If God decreases, he is, necessarily, incomplete after the change. The Deity, then, is incapable of development either positively or negatively. He neither evolves nor devolves. His attributes, considered individually, can never be greater or less than what they are and have always been. God will never be wiser, more loving, more powerful, or holier than he ever has been and ever must be.

This is at least implied in God's declaration to Moses: "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14); and is explicit in other texts. E.g.,

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

"I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Mal. 3:6).

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

2. *The immutability of God's Life* - When we talk about the immutability of God's life we are very close to the notion of eternity or everlastingness. We are saying that God never began to be nor will ever cease to be. His life simply is. He did not come into existence

(for to become existent is a change from nothing to something), nor will he go out of existence (for to cease existing is a change from something to nothing). God is not young or old: He is. Thus, we read:

"In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end" (Ps. 102:25-27).

"Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps. 90:2; cf. 93:2).

3. *The immutability of God's Character* - Immutability may also be predicated of God's moral character. He can become neither better (morally) nor worse than what he is. If God could change (or become) in respect to his moral character, it would be either for the better or the worse. If for the better, it would indicate that he had been morally imperfect or incomplete antecedent to the time of change, and hence never God. If for the worse, it would indicate that he is now morally less perfect or complete, i.e., subsequent to the time of change, and hence no longer God. It will not do to say that God might conceivably change from one perfect being into another equally perfect being. For one must then specify in what sense he has changed. What constitutes God as different in the second mode of being from what he was in the first? Does he have more attributes, fewer attributes, better or worse attributes? If God in the second mode of being has the same attributes (both quantitatively and qualitatively), in what sense is he different from what he was in the first mode of being?

4. *The immutability of God's Plan* - To deny immutability to God's purpose or plan would be no less an affront to the Deity than to predicate change of his being, life, and character. There are, as I

understand, only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter his purpose:

(a) if he lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate any and all contingencies (in which case he would not be omniscient; contrary to the claims of open theism); or

(b) assuming he had the needed foresight, he lacked the power or ability to effect what he had planned (in which case he would not be omnipotent).

But since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of his purpose. Also, since he is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to his creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, ***the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God***. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic Covenant was no change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of his will, *an eternal will which decreed change* (i.e., change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant). Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization (historical and concrete) of what God had from eternity decreed.

"The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:10-11; cf. 110:4).

"The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand'" (Isa. 14:24).

"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose' . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isa. 46:9-11).

"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isa. 48:8-11).

"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails" (Prov. 19:21).

"But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases" (Job 23:13).

"I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

"Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:17).

C. Can God Change His Mind?

No treatment of the doctrine of immutability would be complete without a discussion of the problem posed by God's alleged "repentance." If God's plan is unalterable and he is immutable, in what sense can it be said that he "changed his mind"?

The word typically translated "change his mind" or "repent" is *nacham*. This word can be rendered in any one of four ways:

(1) "to experience emotional pain or weakness" or "to feel grief or sorrow" (cf. Gen. 6:6-7; Exod. 13:17; Judges 21:6,15; 1 Sam 15:11,35; Job 42:6; Jer. 31:19);

(2) "to be comforted" or "to comfort oneself" (cf. Gen. 24:67; 27:42; 37:35; 38:12; 2 Sam. 13:39; Pss. 77:3; 119:52; Isa. 1:24; Jer. 31:15; Ezek. 5:13; 14:22; 31:16; 32:31);

(3) "relenting from" or "repudiating" a course of action that is already underway (cf. Dt. 32:36 = Ps. 135:14; Judges 2:18; 2 Sam. 24:16 = 1 Chron. 21:15; Pss. 90:13; 106:45; Jer. 8:6; 20:16; 42:10); and

(4) "to retract" a statement or "to relent or change one's mind concerning, to deviate from" a stated course of action (cf. Ex. 32:12,14; Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Isa. 57:6; Jer. 4:28; 15:6; 18:8,10; 26:3,13,19; Ezek. 24:14; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2; Zech. 8:14).

This problem compels us to acknowledge the ambiguity of the English word "repent" and cautions us to be careful in ascribing it to God. Human beings repent of *moral evil*. We transgress God's law and acknowledge our sorrow for having done so and our determination to change how we behave. Obviously, whatever else God's "repenting" might mean, it does not mean he has sinned and is changing his ways. If this were the case, he would hardly be worthy of the title God, still less would he be worthy of anyone's worship. This is why most English versions (except the KJV) use the word "relent" or "retract" or something similar.

Let's look specifically at two passages, both of which use the word *nacham*.

"God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Num. 23:19).

"So Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind' (1 Sam. 15:28-29).

Note well: in 1 Sam. 15:11,35 it says that God "repented" or "regretted" making Saul king. Yet in 1 Sam. 15:29 and Num. 23:19 it says that God cannot "repent" or "regret" an action he has taken. Scholars have generally said that there are four possible ways of responding to these texts:

- the statements in 1 Sam. 15:11,35, and 1 Sam. 15:29 (Num. 23:19) are contradictory;
- the statement in 1 Sam. 15:29 (Num. 23:19) must be interpreted in light of those in 1 Sam. 15:11,35;
- the statements in 1 Sam. 15:11,35 must be interpreted in light of that in 1 Sam. 15:29 (Num. 23:19);
- the statements in 1 Sam. 15:11,35 use the word *nacham* to mean "regret" or "feel emotional sorrow" whereas in 1 Sam. 15:29 it means "to deviate" from or "to change one's mind" concerning a stated course of action; thus, in point of fact, there is no inconsistency between vv. 11,35 and v. 29.

Open theists contend that Num. 23:19 means that, whereas God generally can repent, in this particular case he chooses not to. However, were that true,

"does it not follow from this text [Num. 23:19] that, while it is *generally* true that God *can lie*, in this *particular* case he chooses not to? That is, the parallelism of lying and repenting indicates that just as God cannot lie, he cannot repent. The question becomes, then, can God *ever* lie?" (*God's Lesser Glory*, 87).

Assuming that all would answer the latter question, No (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), it would appear that

“the parallel relation of God’s repentance with lying would lead one to conclude that this passage is teaching more than simply that in this particular historical situation God chooses not to lie or repent. Rather, just as God *can never* lie, so He *can never* repent” (87).

One should also take note of the contrast made between God and man. God is said *not* to be like humans, who both lie and repent:

“Does not the force of this claim evaporate the instant one reads it to say, *in this particular situation* God is not like a man and so does not repent? Do men (i.e., human beings) *always* repent of what they say they will do? If so, the contrast can be maintained. But if human beings *sometimes* carry out what they say and *sometimes* repent and do otherwise, and if God, likewise *sometimes* carries out what he says and *sometimes* repents and does otherwise, then how is God different from humans? The only way the contrast works is if God, unlike men, *never* repents. It is generally true, not merely situationally true, that God does not repent” (88).

This applies as well to the texts in 1 Sam. 15. In other words, "to say that God sometimes repents (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:11,35) and sometimes doesn't (1 Sam. 15:29) would be to argue that he sometimes lies and, in the same sense as with 'repent,' sometimes doesn't. But the truth is that God never lies, and so this text requires also that he never repents" (Ware, 88.)

Two additional observations are in order.

First, many have appealed to a common figure of speech known as *anthropopatheia* or *anthropopathism* (from the Greek *anthropos*, "man," plus *pathos*, "affection, feeling"). Thus, an anthropopathism is a figure of speech wherein certain human passions, feelings, mental activities, and so on are predicated of God. This, of course, is related to the more well-known figure of speech called

anthropomorphism (again, from the Greek for "man" plus *morphe*, "form"), in which there are ascribed to God human body parts (e.g., eyes, mouth, nostrils, hands). Bruce Ware defines *anthropomorphism* as follows:

"A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him" ("An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 4 [1986], 442).

Thus, God is *figuratively portrayed* as "relenting" from a course of action or "changing his mind" but in *literal fact* does not. Clark Pinnock believes that classical theists adopt this approach to the problem because of an extra-biblical presupposition concerning the nature of God:

"The criterion employed here is simply the Greek ideal of perfection. The meaning of Scripture is not then determined from within Scripture, but on the basis of a higher standard, the requirements of adopted philosophical assumptions" (40).

However, contrary to Pinnock's assertion, most evangelicals appeal to anthropomorphism because of what they believe Scripture explicitly teaches concerning the omniscience and immutability of God. It is the "analogy of faith," not Greek philosophical presuppositions, which governs their treatment of such problem texts. Passages such as Numbers 23:19 and the others cited earlier are unequivocal: God is not a man. Therefore he does not lie. He does not change his mind the way people do. He does not promise and then fail to fulfill. Those who appeal to anthropomorphism insist that we are justified in interpreting the unclear in the light of the clear and utilizing a figure of speech generally acknowledged as entirely legitimate.

Second, and even more important, we must recognize the difference between **unconditional divine decrees** and **conditional divine announcements** (or **warnings**). The former *will* occur irrespective of other factors. The latter *may* occur, dependent on the response of the person or persons to whom they apply. Occasionally something explicit in the context will indicate which of the two is in view. Most often, however, statements of divine intent are ambiguous. That is to say, one must determine from other data whether the declaration or determination of God is unconditional or conditional. For example, what we find in the case of Jonah and the Ninevites is most likely *not* an unqualified and unconditional declaration of purpose. Consider carefully the nature of this passage from Jeremiah (18:5-12):

"Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?' declares the LORD. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions. But they will reply, 'It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.'"

That God declared his intention to destroy Nineveh, only to withhold his hand when they repented, is thus no threat to the doctrine of immutability. On the contrary, had God destroyed Nineveh notwithstanding its repentance, he would have shown himself mutable. Shedd explains:

"If God had treated the Ninevites *after* their repentance, as he had threatened to treat them *before* their repentance, this would have proved him to be mutable. It would have showed him to be at one time displeased with impenitence, and at another with penitence. Charnock . . . remarks that 'the unchangeableness of God, when considered in relation to the exercise of his attributes in the government of the world, consists not in always acting in the same manner, however cases and circumstances may alter; but ***in always doing what is right, and in adapting his treatment of his intelligent creatures to the variation of their actions and characters*** [emphasis mine]. When the devils, now fallen, stood as glorious angels, they were the objects of God's love, necessarily; when they fell, they were the objects of God's hatred, because impure. The same reason which made him love them while they were pure, made him hate them when they were criminal.' It is one thing for God to will a change in created things external to himself and another thing for him to change in his own nature and character" (I:352-53).

All this is simply to say that God's immutability requires him to treat the wicked differently from the righteous. When the wicked repent, his treatment of them must change. Therefore, according to Strong, God's immutability "is not that of the stone, that has no internal experience, but rather that of the column of mercury, that rises and falls with every change in the temperature of the surrounding atmosphere" (258).

Thus we see that it is a principle of God's immutable being (as revealed by him in Scripture) that he punishes the wicked and recalcitrant but blesses and forgives the righteous and repentant. If God were to reveal himself as such (as, in fact, he has done), only to punish the repentant and bless the recalcitrant, this would constitute real change and thus destroy immutability. God's declaration of intent to punish the Ninevites because of their sinful behavior and wickedness is *based on the assumption that they are and will remain wicked*. However, if and when they repent (as they did), to

punish them notwithstanding would constitute a change, indeed reversal, in God's will and word, to the effect that he now, as over against the past, punishes rather than blesses the repentant.

Examples of an unconditional decree would be Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Psalm 110:4; Jeremiah 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14. Examples of conditional announcements or warnings would be Exodus 32:12,14; Amos 7:3,6; Jeremiah 15:6; 18:8,10; 26:3,13,19; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2.

D. *God is Dependable*

What all this means, very simply, is that God is dependable! Our trust in him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that he will not, indeed cannot, change. His purposes are unfailing, his promises unassailable. It is because the God who promised us eternal life is immutable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love of Christ. It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, no not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39)!

The Omnipresence of God

The "omni's" of God, if I may refer to them in this way, are of little comfort to the rebellious heart, for they shatter those illusions on the strength of which we so often justify our sin. Thinking that none has access to the secrets of our hearts, we lust, envy, hate, and covet. But

what we naively think to have concealed successfully behind the veil of the soul is but an open book before Him with whom we have to do:

"O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (Ps. 139:1-4).

But might there not be some secluded hideaway, some remote corner of the universe to which even the Deity has no access? Might we not there sin freely? Might we not there sin secretly? But where is "there"?

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps. 139:7-12).

It is not merely the omniscience of God but His omnipresence as well, noted Charles Spurgeon, that makes it dreadful work to sin,

"for we offend the Almighty to his face, and commit acts of treason at the very foot of his throne. Go from him, or flee from him we cannot: neither by patient travel nor by hasty flight can we withdraw from the all-surrounding Deity. His mind is in our mind; himself within ourselves. His spirit is over our spirit; our presence is ever in his presence" (III,b:260).

A. *Inexhaustibly Infinite in Space*

When we speak of God as infinite, we mean that He is without limit, that He is in all relevant respects inexhaustible, subject to no

conceivable calculations, in no way saddled by the imperfections of the creature. **Infinity, in sum, is that in virtue of which the Deity embraces all His perfections in the highest degree.**

Stephen Davis ("Why God Must Be Unlimited," in Linda Tessier, ed., *Concepts of the Ultimate* [London: Macmillan, 1989,], p. 5) defines an *infinite* being as "(1) a being who possesses all the G-properties [i.e., Godlike-making properties] that it is possible for a being to possess; (2) a being all of whose G-properties that admit of an intrinsic maximum are possessed to the maximal degree (for example, being omnipotent); and (3) a being all of whose G-properties that admit of no intrinsic maximum are possessed to a degree unsurpassed by any other being that has ever existed or ever will exist (for instance, being more loving than any other actual being)."

Infinity may thus be predicated of God in several ways. God is infinite, for example, in relation to time, knowledge, power and space. To say that God is infinite with respect to time is to predicate "eternity" of the Divine Being (He is everlasting, without beginning or end). To say that God is infinite with respect to knowledge is to predicate "omniscience" of the Divine Being (He knows all things, and that infallibly). To say that God is infinite with respect to power is to predicate "omnipotence" of the Divine Being. But here we shall speak of God as infinite with respect to space and thus predicate of Him "omnipresence" and "immensity."

A slight distinction between *immensity* and *omnipresence* ought to be noted. Whereas immensity affirms that God transcends all spatial limitations, that His being cannot be contained or localized, omnipresence signifies more specifically the relationship which God in His whole being sustains to the creation itself. In other words, omnipresence (being positive in thrust) means that God is everywhere present in the world; immensity (being negative in thrust) means that He is by no means limited to or confined by it.

This means that it is probably inappropriate to speak of God as having *size*, for this term implies something that is measurable, definable, with boundaries and limitations. Is the question, then, “*How big is God?*” theologically inappropriate?

God, of course, is not “in space” in the sense that, say, we or the angelic host are. We who have material bodies are bounded by space and thus can always be said to be here and not there, or there and not here. That is, a body occupies a place in space. Angelic spirits, on the other hand, as well as the dead in Christ now in the intermediate state, are not bound by space and yet they are somewhere, not everywhere. But God, and God alone, fills all space. He is not absent from any portion of space, nor more present in one portion than in another. To put it in other terms, we are in space *circumscriptively*, angels are in space *definitively*, but God is in space *repletively*.

B. *Essentially and Wholly Present*

The teaching of Scripture on God's omnipresence is unassailable. In addition to what we have already seen in Psalm 139, note the following:

“Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD” (Jer. 23:24).

“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27; see also 2 Chron. 2:6; Isa. 66 :1).

“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph. 1:22-23).

“For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28a).

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

Several aspects of God's omnipresence call for comment.

1. In the first place, *God is omnipresent according to His being and not merely according to His operation.* That is to say, He is essentially or substantially, not only dynamically, omnipresent. It is the heresy of deism which contends that God is present in all places only by way of influence and power, acting upon the world from a distance, but not Himself wholly present throughout. As Bavinck explains,

"God is not present in creation as a king in his realm or a captain aboard his ship. He does not act upon the world from a distance; but with his whole being he is present powerfully here and everywhere with respect to his essence and power" (162).

2. Second, *although God is wholly present throughout all things, He is yet distinct from all things.* It does not follow that because God is essentially in everything that everything is essentially God. It is the heresy of pantheism that the being of God is one and the same with the being of all reality. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world = O; theism asserts that God minus the world = God. The universe is the creation of God and thus, in respect to essence, no part of Him. The creation is ontologically other than God, a product *ex nihilo* of the divine will, not an extension of the Divine Being itself. Consequently, although all things are permeated and sustained in being by God (Col. 1:16-17; Acts 17:28), God is not all things. Again, God is not present *as* each point in space but rather present *with/in* each point in space.

3. Third, *this presence of God throughout the whole of space is not by local diffusion, multiplication, or distribution.* Being wholly spirit, God is not subject to the laws of matter such as extension and displacement. He cannot be divided or separated such that one part

of His being is here and not there, and another part there and not here. The whole of His being is always everywhere, no less nor more here than there, or there than here. J. L. Dagg comments:

"God is indivisible. We cannot say, that a part of his essence is here, and a part yonder. If this were the mode of God's omnipresence in universal space, he would be infinitely divided, and only an infinitely small part of him would be present at each place. It would not be the whole deity that takes cognizance of our actions, and listens to our petitions. This notion is unfavorable to piety, and opposed to the true sense of Scripture: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (61).

4. Finally, *whereas the presence of a body in a place of space excludes the simultaneous and in all ways identical presence of another body in the same place of space, such is not true of the Divine Being. God is, in the whole of His being, where everything else is (including matter).* Substance or matter is in no way displaced or spatially excluded by the presence of God. To put it bluntly, **when God created all things out of nothing, He did not have to "move out of the way" to make room for the world.** He is where it is.

C. *The Limitations of Human Metaphors*

The doctrine of God's omnipresence is not without its problems. For example, if God is everywhere present, and that equally, in what sense can He be said to "indwell" or "abide in" the Christian but not the non-Christian? Paul affirms that you "are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Rom. 8:9a). And again, "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Rom. 8:11). It was Jesus who said, "If anyone loves Me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). It is in Christ, Paul reminds us,

that we are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:22). Christ Himself "dwells" in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17). And what is the mystery now disclosed to the saints? It is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

See esp. Ps. 16:11 - "***In thy presence*** is fulness of joy. ***At thy right hand*** are pleasures forevermore."

Similarly, if God is wholly everywhere present, what can it mean to say the Spirit "descended" at Pentecost or "fell upon" believers (cf. Acts 1:8; 2:17; 10:44-48)? The same question is asked concerning those texts which speak of heaven as the abode of God. For example:

"Look down from heaven, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel and the land you have given us as you promised on oath to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut. 26:15).

"From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth" (Ps. 33:13-14; see also Ps. 11:4; 115:3).

The portrayal of God in heaven is not as difficult as it may appear. Clearly, the point of such descriptive statements is not to deny God's presence upon the earth, or anywhere else for that matter. Rather, it is to emphasize the ethical and ontological transcendence of God vis-a-vis the creature. It is His holiness, His wholly-otherness if you will, that is being magnified. According to A. H. Strong, "When God is said to 'dwell in the heavens,' we are to understand the language either as a symbolic expression of exaltation above earthly things, or as a declaration that his most special and glorious self-manifestations are to the spirits of heaven" (280).

The other statements noted above, however, are not so readily intelligible. The Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg attempted to explain the problem in this way:

"There are passages of Scripture which speak of God's removing from one place to another; of his approaching and departing; of his dwelling in heaven, and of his coming near to his people, and taking up his abode with them. These are manifestly accommodations of language; just as when eyes or hands are attributed to him. They refer to the *manifestations* of his presence in his various works, and dispensations, in which such changes take place, as are appropriately and impressively expressed by this language" (61).

Likewise, J. O. Buswell insisted that we interpret statements concerning God's coming and going as "anthropomorphic expressions" which are "clearly figurative" (137). Berkhof contends that although God is present in every part of His creation, He is not equally present in the same sense in all His creatures:

"The nature of His indwelling is in harmony with that of His creatures. He does not dwell on earth as He does in heaven, in animals as He does in man, in the inorganic as He does in the organic creation, in the wicked as He does in the pious, nor in the Church as He does in Christ. There is an endless variety in the manner in which He is immanent in His creatures, and in the measure in which they reveal God to those who have eyes to see" (61).

Unfortunately, Berkhof does not tell us in what sense God's presence differs. A. A. Hodge attempts to do this by conceiving of God's presence according to several different modes. In respect to essence and knowledge, He is present the same everywhere and always. However,

"as to his self-manifestation and the exercise of his power, his presence differs endlessly in different cases in degree and mode. Thus God is present to the church as he is not to the world. Thus he is present in hell in the manifestation and execution of righteous wrath, while he is present in heaven in the manifestation and communication of gracious love and glory" (141).

Similarly, according to Shedd, "God is said to be 'in heaven,' 'in believers,' 'in hell,' etc. because of a special manifestation of his glory, or his grace, or his retribution" (I:341).

Does this mean, for example, that whereas the gracious God is in the unbeliever, He is not in him "graciously"? That is to say, God's perfect presence in all need not entail the same manifestation of divine power. His indwelling of the Christian is in some sense qualitatively different from His presence in the non-Christian. It is not simply a "spatial" but also a "spiritual" presence, such that distinctive divine blessings and operations are dispensed only in the believer.

Indwelling, therefore, is something of a metaphor designed to emphasize the unique personal and salvific relationship the Christian sustains to God, be it the new life bestowed and nourished, the new power by which obedience is now possible, or whatever. Thus to be "far" from God is not to be spatially at a distance but ethically and relationally incongruous with Him. Thus, drawing "near" to God does not require a journey, only repentance, faith, and humility (cf. Isa. 57:15; 59:2; Prov. 15:29).

This attempt at resolving the problem of God's omnipresence and His "special" presence is not entirely satisfactory. Few, if any, of the terms I have used are precisely accurate in drawing what we know are legitimate biblical distinctions. However, we know that the Holy Spirit "indwells" Christians but not the lost. We know that God does give Christians a divine and supernatural enablement by virtue of His indwelling Spirit which He does not make available to the unbeliever. We know that at the second advent the unrepentant will be punished "with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thes. 1:9), whereas we who believe shall abide with Him forever. These verities are clear enough. We know what they entail. Our inability to reconcile them in every respect with God's omnipresence is due only to our limitations, and in no way detracts from their eternal validity.

D. *Warning and Consolation*

The doctrine of God's omnipresence is of immeasurable practical benefit. It is, first of all, a stern warning to the wicked, as Charnock elaborates:

"How terrible should the thoughts of this attribute be to sinners! How foolish is it to imagine any hiding-place from the incomprehensible God, who fills and contains all things, and is present in every point of the world. When men have shut the door, and made all darkness within, to meditate or commit a crime, they cannot in the most intricate recesses be sheltered from the presence of God. If they could separate themselves from their own shadows, they could not avoid his company, or be obscured from his sight: Ps. cxxxix. 12, 'The darkness and light are both alike to him.' Hypocrites cannot disguise their sentiments from him; he is in the most secret nook of their hearts. No thought is hid, no lust is secret, but the eye of God beholds this, and that, and the other. He is present with our heart when we imagine, with our hands when we act. We may exclude the sun from peeping into our solitudes, but not the eyes of God from beholding our actions" (174).

If God's omnipresence frightens the wicked, it should console the righteous. No matter what the trial, no matter the place of its occurrence; no matter the swiftness with which it assaults, no matter the depth of its power, God is ever with us! His loving protection ever abides. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, **for you are with me**; your rod and your staff they comfort me" (Ps. 23:4).

Finally, Charnock reminds us of what a glorious and powerful incentive to holiness is the truth of God's omnipresence:

"What man would do an unworthy action, or speak an unhandsome word in the presence of his prince? The eye of the general inflames the spirit of a soldier. Why did David 'keep God's testimonies;?"

Because he considered that 'all his ways were before him,' Ps. cxix. 168; because he was persuaded his ways were present with God, God's precepts should be present with him. The same was the cause of Job's integrity; 'doth he not see my ways?' Job xxxi. 4; to have God in our eye is the way to be sincere, 'walk before me,' as in my sight, 'and be thou perfect,' Gen. xvii. 1. Communion with God consists chiefly in an ordering our ways as in the presence of him that is invisible. This would make us spiritual, raised and watchful in all our passions, if we considered that God is present with us in our shops, in our chambers, in our walks, and in our meetings, as present with us as with the angels in heaven; who though they have a presence of glory above us, yet have not a greater measure of his essential presence than we have" (179).

The Love of God

The love of God, as with His grace, mercy, and longsuffering, is another aspect of that more general attribute which we have referred to as *goodness*. More than that: ***Love is something God is***. The apostle John concludes that lovelessness on the part of the individual is an indication that one does not know God, "because God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love, therefore, according to Carl Henry, "is not accidental or incidental to God; it is an essential revelation of the divine nature, a fundamental and eternal perfection" (V:341). Simply put, *God is a lover*.

But what is love? Love is simply the giving by God of Himself to His creatures. It is the benevolent disposition or inclination in God that stirs him to bestow benefits both physical and spiritual upon those created in His image (and is thus in this respect synonymous with grace). However, insofar as not all of God's creatures receive and

experience His love in precisely the same manner or to the same degree, one cannot speak of "the love of God" without qualification. It seems inescapable, both from Scripture and experience, that we differentiate between the love of God as manifested in *common grace* and the love of God as manifested in *special grace*.

- The love of God as manifested in common grace is the love of God as creator which consists of providential kindness, mercy, and longsuffering. It is an indiscriminate and universal love which constrains to the bestowing of all physical and spiritual benefits short of salvation itself. It is received and experienced by the elect and non-elect alike (see Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-38).

- The love of God as manifested in special grace is the love of God as savior, which consists of redemption, the efficacy of regenerating grace, and the irrevocable possession of eternal life. It is a discriminate and particular love that leads him to bestow the grace of eternal life in Christ. It is received and experienced by the elect only.

Helpful in this regard is the way D. A. Carson identifies five distinguishable ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God ("On Distorting the Love of God," *BibSac*, 156 January-March 1999, No. 621, pp. 3-13):

(1) First is the peculiar love of the Father for the Son (John 3:35; 5:20) and of the Son for the Father (John 14:31).

(2) Second is God's providential love over all of his creation. Although the word "love" is itself rarely used in this way, there is no escaping the fact that the world is the product of a loving Creator (see the declaration of "good" over what God has made in Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31).

(3) Third is God's saving love toward the fallen world (John 3:16).

(4) Fourth is God's particular, effectual, selecting love for his elect. The elect may be the nation of Israel, or the church, or specific

individuals. See esp. Deut. 7:7-8; 10:14-15; Eph. 5:25.

(5) Fifth is God's love toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way. Often the experience of God's love is portrayed as something that is conditioned upon obedience and the fear of God. This doesn't have to do with that love by which we are brought into a saving relationship with God but rather with our capacity to feel and enjoy the affection of God. See Jude 21; John 15:9-10; Psalm 103:9-18.

A. *The Principles of Divine Love*

1. Like grace, the saving love of God is undeserved. This is but to say that the love of God for sinners, which issues in their salvation, finds no obstacle in their sin. God loves us while we were yet sinners precisely in order that the glory of His love might be supremely magnified. It was when we were still "powerless" that "Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). Again, Paul stressed that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8; cf. Deut. 7:6-8). Consequently, the sole cause of God's saving love for sinners is God Himself!

"What was there in me that could merit esteem,

Or give the Creator delight?

'Twas even so, Father, I ever must sing,

Because it seemed good in Thy sight."

2. This love of God, then, is clearly the source or cause of the atoning work of Christ. God does not love men because Christ died for them, Christ died for them because God loved them. The death of the Savior is not to be conceived as restoring in people something on the basis of which we might then win God's love. The sacrifice of Christ does not procure God's affection, as if it were necessary, through His sufferings, to extract love from an otherwise stern,

unwilling, reluctant Deity. On the contrary, God's love constrains to the death of Christ and is supremely manifested therein. In a word, the saving love of God is giving:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1-2).

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

The citation of such texts could continue seemingly without end (see also Rom. 5:6-8; 1 John 3:16; Rev. 1:5). But after a survey of only these few it is evident that, in the words of Henry, "almost invariably the New Testament Epistles expound God's love for us by reference to the cross. To eliminate the death of Christ for sinners would eviscerate the very heart of divine love as portrayed in the New Testament" (VI:355).

3. The saving love of God is also sovereign. John Murray explains as follows:

"Truly God is love. Love is not something adventitious; it is not something that God may choose to be or choose not to be. He is love,

and that necessarily, inherently, and eternally. As God is spirit, as he is light, so he is love. Yet it belongs to the very essence of electing love to recognize that it is not inherently necessary to that love which God necessarily and eternally is that he should set such love as issues in redemption and adoption upon utterly undesirable and hell-deserving objects. It was of the free and sovereign good pleasure of his will, a good pleasure that emanated from the depths of his own goodness, that he chose a people to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. The reason resides wholly in himself and proceeds from determinations that are peculiarly his as the "I am that I am" (RAA, 10).

A. W. Pink concurs. Concerning the statement, "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated," he writes: There was no more reason in Jacob why he should be the object of Divine love, than there was in Esau. They both had the same parents, and were born at the same time, being twins [neither one had done anything good or evil]: yet God loved the one and hated the other! Why? Because it pleased Him to do so" (93).

Thus, to say that love is sovereign is to say it is distinguishing. It is, by definition as saving love, bestowed upon and experienced by those only who are in fact saved (i.e., the elect). Although there is surely a sense in which God loves the non-elect, He does not love them redemptively. If He did, they would certainly be redeemed. God loves them, but not savingly, else they would certainly be saved. All this is but to say that God's eternal, electing love is not universal but particular.

4. It is also to the saving love of God that we trace the cause of our predestination. Paul writes:

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

Although God certainly foresees all that comes to pass, more than bare foresight is envisioned here. The foreknowledge of which Paul speaks in Romans 8:29 is distinguishing, not universal: it is a foreknowledge of those and those only who are in turn predestined, called, justified, and glorified. But what precisely does it mean? Murray explains:

"Many times in Scripture 'know' has a pregnant meaning which goes beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with love, to set regard upon, to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action (of. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 2:25; Psalm 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Amos 3:2; Hosea 13:5; Matt. 7:23; I Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; II Tim. 2:19; I John 3:1). There is no reason why this import of the word 'know' should not be applied to 'foreknow' in this passage, as also in 11:2 where it also occurs in the same kind of construction and where the thought of election is patently present (cf. 11: 5, 6). When this import is appreciated, then there is no reason for adding any qualifying notion and 'whom he foreknew' is seen to contain within itself the differentiating element required. It means 'whom he set regard upon' or 'whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight' and is virtually equivalent to 'whom he foreloved'" (I:317).

It is, therefore, God's eternal and distinguishing love, conditioned upon no other grounds than His own sovereign and immutable purpose, that explains and accounts for our predestination unto conformity to Christ.

5. This same love of God is the reason for our adoption as sons. It was "in love" that God "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance [not with our foreseen faith but in accordance] with his pleasure and will" (Eph. 1:4b-5). It is because God loved that he predestinated. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us," John understandably exclaims, "that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1)!

"Behold the amazing gift of love

The Father hath bestowed,

On us the sinful sons of men,

To call us sons of God!" (Isaac Watts)

6. We should not in the least be surprised that this love of God is described as "great." It was because of his "great love for us" that God made us alive together with Christ. It is a great love because it can never be exhausted, its depths never plumbed, its purpose never thwarted by the sin of man (Eph. 2:4-5). And again, the context will not permit this love to be universalized. Murray writes that it is a love

"which impels to the efficacious actions [of being quickened together with Christ and raised with Him] and cannot have an extent broader than those embraced in the actions specified. The same kind of relationship obtains between the 'great love' and the saving actions as obtains between love and predestination in Ephesians 1:5 and, again, the quality of the love must be as distinctive as the saving acts which are its result" (I:71).

This is not to say that God does not "love" in any sense those who are never saved (i.e., made spiritually alive and raised up with Christ). It is simply to say that only those who are, in fact, saved are especially God's "beloved" and the objects of a divine affection that actually issues in their being saved.

7. The saving love of God is eternal. It was "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4-5) that He chose us in Christ and predestined us unto adoption as sons (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13). Charles Spurgeon describes this *eternal* love:

"In the very beginning, when this great universe lay in the mind of God, like unborn forests in the acorn cup; long ere the echoes awoke

the solitudes; before the mountains were brought forth; and long ere the light flashed through the sky, God loved His chosen creatures. Before there was any created being; when the ether was not fanned by an angel's wing, when space itself had not an existence, where there was nothing save God alone — even then, in that loneliness of Deity, and in that deep quiet and profundity, His bowels moved with love for His chosen. Their names were written on His heart, and then were they dear to His soul. Jesus loved His people before the foundation of the world — even from eternity! and when He called me by His grace, He said to me, 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee'(I:167).

8. This love is not only eternal in its conception, it is irrevocable in its purpose. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Rom. 8:35). Nothing, Paul insists and assures, shall be able to separate us from the love of Christ. That alone can sever us from the embrace of God's love which is greater than God. Hence we rest secure.

"My name from the palms of His hands

Eternity will not erase;

Impress'd on His heart it remains,

In marks of indelible grace."

9. In Romans 5, Paul can speak of a confident hope on no other ground than that God has loved us in Christ. It is because He loved us when we were yet His enemies, a love demonstrated by the sending of His Son, that His love for us now that we are His friends is unshakable. This "much more" argument of Romans 5:8-11 is encouragement indeed. Paul says, in effect, that if when we were alienated from God, He, notwithstanding, reconciled us to Himself through His Son, how much more, now that we have been graciously instated in His favor and the alienation removed, shall the exalted

and everlasting life of Christ insure our being saved to the uttermost! Murray comments: "It would be a violation of the wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness of God to suppose that he would have done the greater [love His enemies] and fail in the lesser [love His friends]" (I:175).

10. Discipline, no less than life, is a product of the divine love: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb, 12:5b-6).

The Hebrew Christians to whom these words were addressed had mistakenly come to think that the absence of affliction was a sign of God's special favor and, therefore, that suffering and oppression were an indication of His displeasure. On the contrary, so far from being a proof of God's anger or rejection of us, afflictions are evidence of His fatherly love. Discipline, writes Philip Hughes, "is the mark not of a harsh and heartless father but of a father who is deeply and lovingly concerned for the well-being of his son" (528).

11. The eternal and irrevocable love which God has for His people also secures far more than merely the reconciliation of estranged sinners. This manifold design of God's saving love is especially evident in John's first epistle. For example, the love that God has for us is said to make possible our love for one another. Following his discussion of God's love as witnessed in the atoning sacrifice of His Son (1 John 4:7-11), John writes: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us".(1 John 4:12).

Other texts of Scripture confirm that God has never been seen (cf. 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; Exod. 33:20). How, then, can He be known? In John 1:18 the answer is given: "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."

This is all well and good, but for what purpose does John include it in this context? Evidently, according to John Stott, he wishes to say that the unseen God, revealed once in His Son, "is now revealed in His people if and when they love one another. God's love is seen in their love because their love is His love imparted to them by His Spirit" (164). The point is ***that although God cannot be seen in Himself He can be seen in those in whom He abides when they love others with that very love wherewith they were loved!*** The fullness of God's redemptive love for us in Christ thus attains its intended goal in our love for one another.

This notion that God's love has for its ultimate design more than the salvation of those on whom it is showered is seen yet again in 1 John 2:5. Here we read that "if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him." That is to say, the love of God achieves its ordained purpose when we as the recipients of it in turn obey Him from whom it has come forth.

John pursues this same theme from yet another angle in 1 John 4:17. "Love is made complete among us," he argues, "so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him." Once more, God's love secures its end to the degree that we who are its objects cease to fear the day of judgment. The knowledge of God's fatherly love should forever dispel any apprehension of standing in His presence. This is not presumption, but a Spirit-induced conviction that God's love has efficaciously and eternally provided for us in Christ that righteousness on the basis of which we are delivered from all penal liability. God's perfect love for us, when rightly perceived, does indeed cast out fear!

12. No wonder, then, in light of what we have seen, that Paul speaks of the love of God as *incomprehensible!* And yet he prays specifically that we might know this love that "surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). John Eadie says it beautifully. God's love

"may be known in some features and to some extent, but at the same time it stretches away into infinitude, far beyond the ken of human discovery and analysis. As a fact manifested in time and embodied in the incarnation, life, teaching, and death of the Son of God, it may be understood, for it assumed a nature of clay, bled on the cross, and lay prostrate in the tomb; but in its unbeginning existence as an eternal passion, antedating alike the Creation and the Fall, it 'passeth knowledge.' In the blessings which it confers - the pardon, grace, and glory which it provides - it may be seen in palpable exhibition, and experienced in happy consciousness; but in its limitless power and endless resources it baffles thought and description. In the terrible sufferings and death to which it led, and in the self-denial and sacrifices which it involved, it may be known so far by the application of human instincts and analogies; but the fathomless fervour of a Divine affection surpasses the measurements of created intellect. As the attachment of a man, it may be gauged; but as the love of a God, who can by searching find it out? Uncaused itself it originated salvation; unresponded to amidst the 'contradiction of sinners,' it neither pined nor collapsed. It led from Divine immortality to human agonies and dissolution, for the victim was bound to the cross not by the nails of the military executioner, but by the 'cords of love.' It loved repulsive unloveliness, and, unnourished by reciprocated attachment, its ardour was unquenched, nay, is unquenchable, for it is changeless as the bosom in which it dwells" (257-58).

B. *Immeasurable Love*

No discussion of the love of God would be complete without some statement on John 3:16. Indeed, the preceding analysis was in large measure designed to enable us to interpret correctly and appreciate more deeply the sense of divine love as found in that passage of Scripture.

The meaning of this text has frequently been obscured by interpreters who, unfortunately, have failed to place it in the broader context of what Scripture as a whole says concerning this divine

attribute. Therefore, in the light of what we have already seen to be true of the love of God, let us consider this most famous of texts.

Often the interpretation of John 3:16 begins with the term *world*, for it is believed that here lies the key to a proper appreciation of the dimensions of divine love. "Just think," we are told, "of the multitudes of men and women who have, do now, and yet shall swarm across the face of the earth. God loves them all, each and every one. Indeed, God so loves them that He gave His only begotten Son to die for each and every one of them. O how great the love of God must be to embrace within its arms these uncounted multitudes of people."

Is this what John (or Jesus, as recorded by John) had in mind? It is undeniably his purpose to set before us the immeasurable love of God. But are we able to perceive how immeasurable God's love is by measuring how big the world is? I think not. What is the finite sum of mankind when set opposite the infinitude of God? We could as well measure the strength of the blacksmith by declaring him capable of supporting a feather on an outstretched palm! The primary force of this text is certainly to magnify the infinite quality and majesty of God's love. But such an end can never be reached by computing the extent or number of its objects. Do we to any degree heighten the value of Christ's death by ascertaining the *quantity* of those for whom He died? Of course not! Had He but died for *one sinner*, the value of His sacrifice would be not less glorious than had He suffered for ten millions of worlds!

Rather, let us pause to consider the contrast which the apostle intends for us to see. John surely desires that we reflect in our hearts upon the immeasurable character of so great a love, and that we do so by placing in contrast, one over against the other — God and the world. What does this reveal? Of what do we think concerning God when He is seen loving the world? And of what do we think concerning the world when it is seen as the object of God's love? Is the contrast this: that God is one and the world many? Is it that His

love is magnified because He, as one, has loved the world, comprised of many? Again, certainly not.

This love is infinitely majestic because God, as **holy**, has loved the world, as **sinful**! What strikes us is that God who is **righteous** loves the world which is **unrighteous**. This text takes root in our hearts because it declares that He who dwells in unapproachable **light** has deigned to enter the realm of **darkness**; that He who is **just** has given Himself for the **unjust** (1 Peter 3:18); that He who is altogether **glorious** and **desirable** has suffered endless shame for **detestable** and **repugnant** creatures, who apart from His grace respond only with hell-deserving hostility! Thus, as Murray has said,

"it is what God loved in respect of its character that throws into relief the incomparable and incomprehensible love of God. To find anything else as the governing thought would detract from the emphasis. **God loved what is the antithesis of himself**; this is its marvel and greatness" (I:79).

When we read John's Gospel (and Epistles), we discover that the "world" is viewed fundamentally neither as the elect nor non-elect but as a collective organism: sinful, estranged, alienated from God, abiding under His wrath and curse. The world is detestable because it is the contradiction of all that is holy, good, righteous, and true. The world, then, is the contradiction of God. It is synonymous with all that is evil and noisome. It is that system of fallen humanity viewed not in terms of its size but as a satanically controlled kingdom hostile to the kingdom of Christ. *It is what God loved in respect of its quality therefore, not quantity that sheds such glorious light on this divine attribute.*

In summary, carefully note the explanation of B. B. Warfield:

"The marvel . . . which the text brings before us is just that marvel above all other marvels in this marvelous world of ours - the marvel of God's love for sinners. And this is the measure by which we are

invited to measure the greatness of the love of God. It is not that it is so great that it is able to extend over the whole of a big world: it is so great that it is able to prevail over the Holy God's hatred and abhorrence of sin. For herein is love, that God could love the world - the world that lies in the evil one: that God who is all-holy and just and good, could so love this world that He gave His only begotten Son for it, - that He might not judge it, but that it might be saved" (515-16).

Note carefully Warfield's definition of the term *world*:

"It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is *ethical*, and ***the point of its employment is not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when He gave His son for it.*** The whole debate as to whether the love here celebrated distributes itself to each and every man that enters into the composition of the world, or terminates on the elect alone chosen out of the world, lies thus outside the immediate scope of the passage and does not supply any key to its interpretation. The passage was not intended to teach, and certainly does not teach, that God loves all men alike and visits each and every one alike with the same manifestations of His love: and as little was it intended to teach or does it teach that His love is confined to a few especially chosen individuals selected out of the world. What it is intended to do is to arouse in our hearts a wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for the sinful world — conceived, here, not quantitatively but qualitatively as, in its very distinguishing characteristic, sinful" (516).

The Fatherhood of God

What comes to mind when you hear the word "God"? What is your concept of the Creator? I've talked with people who relate to God as if He were something of a *coach*. There's no real relationship, at least not on a personal level. Joining the church is like making the team. When God does choose to communicate, it isn't with soft-spoken words of loving encouragement but with an angry shout of "Run faster! Jump higher! Two more laps!" One's responsibility is to train hard, perform well on game day, and perhaps be fortunate enough to get a slap on the seat and a perfunctory 'Nice job.'

Others think of God more as a *teacher*. To them, being a Christian means studying harder, learning more, memorizing doctrines and texts of Scripture and then regurgitating it all on test day. The important thing is getting all "A's" and graduating to the next "grade" of spirituality. God's primary role is to make sure we spell His name right and assign detention when we misbehave.

Then there are those for whom God is a *boss*. Getting a good job in the kingdom is priority one. Christians are just so many employees who are responsible for getting to work on time and putting in a solid eight hours. God is there principally to fill out performance reports and to decide who gets a raise, who gets a vacation, and who gets fired!

To speak to such people about God being their *Father* can be risky. It not only doesn't compute, it confuses and angers them. The reason isn't hard to understand. The very word, *Father*, may yet evoke the image of an abusive bully with a stick in his hand. Others think only of a void in their home, the never-present father whose selfish disregard for their needs hurts as much now as it did then.

It may be that on hearing the word *Father* you smell the stench of alcohol. Perhaps you feel the abusive hand, groping where it should not be, soon after you'd fallen asleep. God knows. He is keenly aware

of how difficult it is for you to entrust your soul to another, when your former wounds have yet to heal.

But He is a Father unlike any other. His love transcends that of even the most caring earthly parent. Won't you allow Him to describe His love for you and the potential for your relationship together? It's all wrapped up in one word. Jesus used it. So can we.

N.B. Mike Bickle, in *Passion for Jesus*, describes other kinds of earthly fathers who may have warped our view of God as Father:

(1) *The Distant or Passive Father*

"The emotionally distant or passive father expresses his affections in a minimal way. He assumes you know he loves you, but he rarely speaks it. However, you don't know he sees or feels your pain or joy. When something wonderful or tragic happens, the passive father just nods his head. You begin to believe God is like that as well. He does not feel your pain or share your joy. He has little affections to express to you. You may reap strong emotional consequences if you are raised by this kind of father" (91).

(2) *The Authoritarian Father*

"The authoritarian father intervenes to stop what you are doing. He hands out a list of dos and don'ts. He interrupts you and says no to the things that are important to you. Your heart is quenched by this. This kind of father does not honor your individuality. He is not interested in your desires or goals - only his own. He wants no partnership or deep intimacy with you, but only to be obeyed" (91).

(3) *The Abusive Father*

"Abusive fathers inflict pain on their children deliberately, hurting them emotionally, mentally, physically and sometimes sexually. There is no greater torment in life than the torment at the hands of

an abusive father. It not only destroys the child's natural emotions, but it deeply shapes his relationship with God" (91).

(4) *The Absent Father*

"The fourth type of father is one who is totally absent. Maybe he is the father you never knew, perhaps even dying before you were born. He is not like the passive father who is there yet does not communicate. He simply is never there. Therefore he never intervenes to help you in times of trouble. You feel totally abandoned and neglected by your earthly father. This hinders your ability to experience the presence of your heavenly Father" (91-92).

(5) *The Accusing Father*

"The fifth father is the most common example. He is the accusing father. He proclaims to love you with his whole heart, but he judges you continually at every failure. In his mind he is trying to motivate you to do right. He thinks if he points out your failures, you will be motivated to try harder next time. He rarely shows you affection or affirms you. If you grew up with this type of father, you will have great difficulty understanding the love of your heavenly Father because you will think God is always accusing you" (92).

A. *God, the Father of Jesus*

Jesus always spoke of God as "my Father," whether as a formal designation or an address to God in prayer. Closer study reveals that Jesus used this address in *all* his prayers, with one exception. From the cross he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

The reason for this sole exception is not simply that Jesus was drawing from an Old Testament text in which the form of address was already supplied (Psalm 22:2). His cry, "My God," rather than "My Father," was a consequence of the judgment to which he was being subjected. Jesus evidently regarded his relationship to God as

penal and judicial, not paternal and filial, as he hung on Calvary's tree for sinners. But in the other twenty-one instances where Jesus prayed, he always addressed God as his Father.

In the Old Testament, God was referred to in many ways, but rarely as Father. Apart from several texts in which God is compared with an earthly father (for example, Psalm 103:13; Proverbs 3:12; Jeremiah 31:20), the word is used of Him only fifteen times.

In seven instances God is conceived as Father of the nation Israel (Deut. 32:6; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 31:9; Malachi 1:6; 2:10). In five other passages God is called the Father of the king in fulfillment of one element of the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; 28:6; Psalm 89:26). God is called Father of the orphaned in a song of praise for His tenderness (Psalm 68:5). In two cases where "my Father" is used as an invocation to God in prayer, it is a prayer, not of any single individual, but of the nation collectively (Jeremiah 3:4,19).

Judging from these passages, it was anything but characteristic of Old Testament spiritual life to refer to God as Father in personal prayer and communion. That depth of intimacy with the Almighty was rare indeed.

Yet, aside from the exception noted above, this is precisely what our Lord Jesus Christ did *every time* He prayed!

Still more significant is the fact that he used the word *Abba* when referring to the Father (Mark 14:36; most scholars agree that the Aramaic term *abba* lies back of the Greek *pater*). *Abba* was a term used in Judaism to express the intimacy, security, and tenderness of a family relationship. More specifically, it was a word that tiny children used to address their fathers. Of course, it didn't preclude courtesy and respect. But above all it was an expression of warm affection and trust.

We read in the Talmud that when a child is weaned it learns to say "abba" (daddy) and "imma" (mommy) (Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus*, 57). Again, the point is that "there is no analogy at all in the whole literature of Jewish prayer (specifically the Palestinian Judaism of our Lord's day) for God being addressed as Abba" (Jeremias, 57).

Joachim Jeremias argues that "to the Jewish mind it would have been disrespectful and therefore inconceivable to address God with this familiar word. For Jesus to venture to take this step was something new and unheard of. He spoke to God like a child to its father: simply, inwardly, confidently. Jesus' use of *abba* in addressing God reveals the heart of his relationship with God" (62).

B. *God, the Father of every Christian*

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Roman (8:15-16) and Galatian (4:6) Christians, saying that we as God's children may likewise address our Father in this way, the depth of that intimacy with God secured for us by the cross of Christ becomes joyfully evident.

* It is important to observe the connection between vv. 15 and 16 in Romans 8. The knowledge that we are sons of God is not a conclusion we draw from the fact that we cry "Abba! Father!" Our cry of "Abba!" is itself the result or fruit of that conviction which the Holy Spirit has evoked in our hearts. In other words, we first receive the Holy Spirit, who then produces in our hearts the unassailable confidence that we are God's children, an assurance that leads us to cry out, in the Spirit's power, "Abba! Father!"

Just think of it! The one, true God who beckons you with the promise of perfect love is none other than your Father, Abba! You need not fear an abusive grasp or a stiff-armed rejection. He longs to embrace you, to relieve your fears, to soothe the wounds inflicted by those who exploited your weakness.

There is joy unspeakable in this truth. How can I describe the comfort and thrill in knowing that the One into whose arms we rush and, as it were, on whose lap we sit, is our Father, our "Daddy." He, in the crook of whose arm we repose, is our Abba. No earthly father ever embraced his child with such affection and tenderness as does He who cradles you with a song.

The Name of God

Moses was in a rut. For forty years he had been living in the land of Midian, tending the sheep and goats that belonged to Jethro, his father-in-law. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, sheep and goats, more goats and more sheep, for forty long, tedious, boring, quiet, uneventful years. It was enough to test anyone's faith.

But the second forty years of Moses' life were nothing like the first forty. Having been raised in the palace of Pharaoh, Moses had access to all the power and prestige and wealth and entertainment and education that the greatest monarch on earth could provide. Yet Moses was forced to flee for having taken the life of an Egyptian taskmaster. Thus, out of that tumultuous, sensuous, never-a-dull-moment life in the regal courts of Egypt, came Moses, to settle into the ordinary, routine, never-an-exciting-moment life in Midian. He woke up every day to sheep and goats, the glamour of Egyptian life by now only a faint glimmer in his aging memory.

And then one day it happened. Perhaps Moses was seeking better pasture for the sheep, or more water, or shade from the sun, or perhaps was chasing after that one wayward lamb that strayed from the flock. It isn't important. What is important is that one moment is on ordinary ground, the next on holy ground. One moment he is in the presence of sheep, the next in the presence of Almighty God! Just think of it, from the boredom of bleating sheep to the stunning rumble of the voice of God!

A. *A Confrontation with Moses* - vv. 1-6

Moses was forty years old when he killed the Egyptian and fled to Midian (see Acts 7:23). Another forty years had passed before this

incident occurred. What incredible patience! Moses knew that God had important plans for him (Acts 7:25). But God was in no hurry.

We are told that he came to Horeb, which means "desolation" or "waste-land." It was probably a synonym for Sinai. Some believe Horeb refers to the wilderness region and Sinai to the mountain itself. Others believe it is reversed. Still others suggest that Horeb was a mountain range and Sinai a particular peak within it. Although no one knows precisely where it was, the Monastery of St. Catherine, along with the Chapel of the Burning Bush, was built in 527 a.d. on what was believed to be Sinai.

- Who or what was the *angel of the Lord*? Some say it was angelic being, a messenger from the court of heaven who represented God, bearing his credentials and speaking on his behalf. But compare v. 2 with vv. 4 and 6. Also see Deut. 33:16; Joshua 5:13-6:2. In all likelihood,, this is the pre-incarnate second person of the Trinity. It is a *theophany* of God the Son.

- What was the *burning bush*? Some argue that Moses merely experienced a vision. Roy Honeycutt argues that "for Moses, the bush burned with the flaming presence of the angel of the Lord. But it may well have been an inner experience, and one standing next to Moses may have seen nothing extraordinary" (328). But nothing in the text suggests it was a vision (contrast with Gen. 15:1). Liberal scholars try to explain it naturalistically, arguing that it was a variety of the gas plant or *Fraxinella*, the *Dictamnus Albus L*. It is a plant almost three feet in height with clusters of purple blossoms. The whole bush is covered with tiny oil glands which are so volatile that it can burst into flames if a fire approaches too near. Perhaps, then, Moses accidentally set it ablaze with a torch. Another attempts to explain the flames by suggesting they were the crimson blossoms of mistletoe twigs (*Loranthus Acaciae*) which grow on various prickly Acacia bushes and Acacia trees throughout the Holy Land. When this bush is in full bloom it becomes a mass of brilliant flaming color and looks as if it is on fire. Others appeal to various kinds of berries or

even the angle of the sunlight. Why not just accept the description as given by the Holy Spirit?

· What did it *symbolize*? a) Fire is frequently a symbol both for God's purifying power and his destructive wrath, i.e., both grace and severity. b) Some say the lowly bush symbolized the pathetic state of the nation Israel in Egyptian bondage, while the fire pointed to the persecution they endured. Thus, "just as the bush remains unconsumed, so Israel will not be crushed by its tormentors" (Sarna, 41). c) Most see in the fire that is self-sufficient, self-perpetuating, and wholly unaffected by its environment, a symbol of the transcendent, awesome, and unapproachable Divine Presence. Here is a God who is consuming, but never consumed.

Why was he told to remove his sandals? Sproul suggests that "the act of removing the shoes was a symbol of Moses' recognition that he was of the earth - earthy. The feet of man, sometimes called 'feet of clay,' symbolize our creatureliness. It is our feet that link us to the earth" (37-8). Hence, God was saying, in effect, I am the Creator, you are the creature!

When God identified himself in v. 6, he does not say "I am the God of Pharaoh" or "I am the God of the Egyptians" or "I am the God of the Canaanites, Hittites," etc. Although in one sense he is God over all, he is peculiarly and particularly the God of his redeemed people. Sarna explains:

"This self-characterization must have been particularly meaningful to Moses, the Israelite who had been brought up in the Egyptian royal palace, yet who had identified with his people's sufferings, who was now a fugitive in Midian and had married the daughter of the high priest of that land, and who seemingly had lost all contact with his family and his people. The mention of his father and his forebears must have had a stunning effect on Moses, jolting him into renewed consciousness of his Israelite heritage and into the sudden realization of his true and inescapable identity" (42).

Moses understandably hid his face (cf. Isa. 6; Acts 9; Rev. 1).

B. *God's Compassion on his People* - vv. 7-9

This God who is an all-consuming fire, this God of power and revelation, in whose presence Moses is thrust to his face on the ground, *is also a God of compassion, sensitivity, and is keenly aware of his people's pain.* Although "I have come down" may seem like strange language for an omnipresent God, it was common Hebrew idiom for divine intervention in human affairs.

C. *God's Commission to Moses* - vv. 10-12

The time of redemption and deliverance has arrived. God is going to act ("I . . . I . . . I"), but he will act through Moses. There were countless ways he could have achieved this deliverance, but he chose to act through people. Moses' response isn't so much an expression of doubt as to his ability as it is an expression of genuine humility. He feels utterly unworthy in view of the magnitude of the task. As Cole write, "self-distrust is good, but only if it leads to trust in God. Otherwise it ends as spiritual paralysis, inability and unwillingness to undertake any course of action" (68).

N.B. Forty years earlier Moses was ready, but God was not. Forty years later God is ready, but Moses is not!

Moses asks: "Who am I?" But who Moses is isn't important. What is important is who is *with* Moses (cf. Mt. 28:18ff.). We ask, "Who am I that God should want to use me?" The honest answer is, "Not much." But that is how God wants it (see 1 Cor. 1:26-31). If Moses were somebody, he might get the glory when the Israelites are delivered. But because Moses is but an earthen vessel, God is guaranteed to get the glory.

D. *A Confirmation of God's Character* -vv. 13-22

After asking "who am I?" in v. 11, Moses now asks of God, "who are *you*?" in v. 13. What exactly is Moses asking? On one level Moses may want to know upon what authority his calling rests, i.e., how shall he validate that call to the people of Israel? But surely Moses is asking for more than God's identity? This is more than a simple "who are you?" that one might ask of a total stranger. God has already identified himself in 3:6 as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Clearly, then, Moses knew *who* God was, and so did the Israelites. Some have questioned this, however, and have appealed to Exod. 6:2-3.

Does this mean that God had previously withheld his name *YHWH* from the patriarchs in favor of using the name *God Almighty* or *El Shaddai*? If so, then Moses' question is perfectly appropriate. But this seems unlikely. It isn't that the patriarchs had never heard the name *YHWH* (*Yahweh*). Rather, they had never been told the *significance* or *meaning* of that name. What God is saying is that *in the character of* or *as* El Shaddai he showed himself to the patriarchs, but *in the character of* or *as* Yahweh he did not. They had certainly heard the name before. In fact, from Genesis 12 to Exodus 3 the name Yahweh was mentioned more than 100x. What they did *not* know, however, was the meaning or theological and redemptive significance of Yahweh.

Look more closely at Moses' question in v. 13. He literally asks, "*What* is his name?" not "*Who*?" The Hebrew word "who" asks only for the title or designation of the individual. The word "what" asks for information concerning the character and quality of the individual. Moses is asking a question that pertains not so much to how God is designated but to the power and attributes and abilities resident in that name. Moses' point was this:

"God, when I go to the Israelites they will want to know what kind of God you are. They will want to know about your character. They will want to know if you are worthy of their trust and confidence and

what you can offer them in their horrible plight. Are you sufficient to do for them what they need to have done?"

This makes sense when we remember that in ancient times a person's name was not simply a designation or label. It did more than simply differentiate one person from another. It was more than a way of identifying people. In ancient times a person didn't merely *have* a name; *a person was his name*. One's name pointed to one's character. **Name was a reflection or expression of nature.** See Exod. 20:7; 33:17-19. See also Pss. 9:10; 18:49; 20:1; 22:22; 68:4; 74:18; 91:14; Prov. 18:10.

Today parents name their children for a variety of reasons: alliteration, in honor of the parent or grandparent, to enhance the individual's popularity, because it sounds fashionable, etc. But in biblical times names were assigned in hope that such would be the destiny or character or calling of the person.

E.g., a) Abram - Abraham (Gen. 17:3-5); b) Jacob - Israel (Gen. 32:28; "Israel" means "he struggles with God"); c) Simon - Peter (Mt. 16:17-18); d) Hosea's children: Jezreel (= God scatters), Lo-Ruhamah (= not loved), LoAmmi (=not my people). To change one's name was an indication of a change in one's character or relationship to God. See also Mt. 1:21; 6:9; 7:22; Acts 4:7.

So what, then, is God's name?

He says, in v. 14, "*I am who I am*". It has also been translated "I am He who is" or "I will be who I will be" or even "I am the 'is-ing' One." In v. 14b the third person singular of the Hebrew verb "to be" is used: lit., "He is." This "name" in v. 14 is **YHWH**, or what is known as the *Tetragrammaton* or "the four-lettered word."

In later years the pious Jew was reluctant to pronounce the name YHWH lest he inadvertently take the Lord's name in vain (Ex. 20:7) and be subject to the death penalty. Every time YHWH appeared in the OT (more than 6,000x), the Jew would read or say "Adonai" or

"my Lord". In 1518 a.d., Petrus Galatinus, confessor to Pope Leo X, transliterated the four Hebrew letters with the Latin letters jhvh. He then added the vowels from Adonai (a-o-a), producing the hybrid Jehovah in English.

In most of our English versions, Lord is the translation of the Hebrew Adonai, whereas LORD is the translation of YHWH. See again Isa. 6:1; Ps. 8:1. Therefore, the name in Ex. 3:14, Yahweh, was the most sacred, holy, revered name of God, rarely spoken by the Jewish people.

This makes what Jesus said in John 8:58-59 all the more staggering. There he said, "Before Abraham was born, I am." The Greek phrase translated "I am" is used throughout the LXX (Greek transl. of Hebrew OT) to render the Hebrew Yahweh! Jesus was saying, "I am Yahweh!" No wonder they charged him with blasphemy. Consider all the "I am" statements in John's gospel (6:35,48; 10:7,9,11; 11:25; 8:12).

So, what does *Yahweh* mean? It does not simply mean "existence" or "to be". Popeye used to sing:

"I'm Popeye the sailor man, I'm Popeye the sailor man, I am what I am and that's all that I am, I'm Popeye the sailor man."

He is simply declaring his existence: "I am what I am, not what you are or what anyone else is; I'm unique; I'm a sailor, nothing more, nothing less, whether you like it or not."

Yahweh, on the other hand, or "I am who/that I am" is a declaration not merely of existence, but of a particular kind of existence; a dynamic, active being. "I am he who is always there, really and truly present, ready to help and to act on your behalf." *It is an expression of covenant relationship, devotedness, faithfulness to be and do what must be done.* The God who entered into covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (3:6) is the same today as he was then; the same in character, faithful to fulfill what he has promised. Here,

then, in Exod. 3:13-14, is the full meaning of God's name revealed for the first time (Exod. 6:2-3).

E. *The Content of God's Name* - Exod. 33:19

First, the declaration "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" is an example of a Hebrew formula called *idem per idem* (see also Ex. 4:13; 16:23; 1 Sam. 23:13; 2 Sam. 15:20; 2 Kings 8:1). According to Piper,

"by leaving the action unspecified the force of this idiom is to preserve the freedom of the subject to perform the action in whatever way he pleases. By simply repeating the action without adding any stipulations the *idem per idem* formula makes clear that the way the action is executed is determined by the will of the subject within the limits of prevailing circumstances. Therefore, when God says, 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will be merciful to whom I will be merciful,' he is stressing that there are no stipulations outside his own counsel or will which determine the disposal of his mercy and grace" (62).

It is somewhat similar to the force of our declaration: "I'm going to do what I'm going to do." I.e., "I intend to accomplish my will, all else notwithstanding."

Second, Exodus 33:19b, from which this declaration comes, is an interpretation or explanation of the essence of God's name and glory (or "goodness") referred to in Exodus 33:19a (cf. Ex. 34:6-7). The divine words "I will be gracious/merciful . . ." in Ex. 33:19 are thus

"a manifestation of God's *glory* (33:18), a 'passing by' of his *goodness* and **a proclamation of his name**. Thus God's glory and his name consist fundamentally in his propensity to show mercy and his sovereign freedom in its distribution. Or, to put it more precisely still, it is the glory of God and his essential nature mainly to dispense mercy (but also wrath, Ex. 34:7) on whomever he pleases apart from

any constraint originating outside his own will. This is the essence of what it means to be God" (Piper, 100).

Exodus 33:19 is not merely a description of the way God treated Moses or even of how he treats Israel. "Rather it is a solemn declaration of ***the nature of God***, or (which is the same thing), a proclamation of his *name and glory*" (Piper, 67). To show mercy independently of external constraints or conditions is what it means ***to be God!*** Therefore,

"since God's *righteousness* consists basically in his acting unswervingly for his own glory, and since his *glory* consists basically in his *sovereign freedom* in the bestowal and withholding of mercy, there is no unrighteousness with God (Rom. 9:11f.). On the contrary, he **must** [emphasis mine] pursue his 'electing purpose' apart from man's 'willing and running,' for only in his sovereign, free bestowal of mercy on whomever he wills is God acting out of a full allegiance to his name and esteem for his glory" (Piper, 101).

Justice and Wrath

Justice

When we speak about the *justice* of God, we have in mind the idea that God always acts in perfect conformity and harmony with his own character. Some suggest that justice is thus a synonym for *righteousness*. Whatever God is, says, or does, by virtue of the fact that it is *God*, makes it righteous. Right and wrong are simply, and respectively, what God either commands or forbids. In other words, God doesn't do or command something because it is right. It is right

because it is done or commanded by God. Righteousness or rectitude or good do not exist independently of God as a law or rule or standard to which God adheres or conforms. Rather, righteousness or rectitude or good are simply *God acting and speaking*.

Justice, therefore, is God acting and speaking in conformity with who he is. To say that God is *just* is to say that he acts and speaks consistently with whatever his righteous nature requires. To be *unjust* is to act and speak inconsistently with whatever his righteous nature requires. That, of course, is a contradiction. That would be to assert that the righteous God acts unrighteously. By definition, that is impossible.

Our primary concern here is with what has been called the ***retributive justice*** of God, or that which God's nature requires him to require of his creatures. Retributive justice is that in virtue of which God gives to each of us that which is our due. It is that in virtue of which God treats us according to our deserts. Retributive justice is thus somewhat synonymous with *punishment*. This is a *necessary* expression of God's reaction to sin and evil. Retributive justice is not something which God may or may not exercise, as is the case with mercy, love, and grace. Retributive justice, i.e., punishment for sin, is a matter of *debt*. It is something from which God cannot refrain doing lest he violate the rectitude and righteousness of his nature and will. **Sin must be punished.** It is a serious misunderstanding of Christianity and the nature of forgiveness to say that believers are those whose guilt is rescinded and whose sins are not punished. Our guilt and sin were fully imputed to our substitute, Jesus, who suffered the retributive justice in our stead.

An excellent illustration of this principle is found in Psalm 103:10. I have defined *retributive justice* as that in God's nature which requires him to deal with us according to our sins and reward us according to our iniquities. But in Ps. 103:10 we are told that God "***has NOT dealt with us according to our sins, NOR rewarded us according to our iniquities!***" Indeed, according

to v. 12, we are told that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Does this mean, then, that God has simply ignored the righteous requirements of his nature, that he has dismissed or set aside the dictates of divine justice? Certainly not. See Romans 3:21-26. All sin is punished, either in the person of the sinner or in the person of his/her substitute. God's retributive justice was satisfied for us in the person of Christ, who endured the full measure of punishment which the justice and righteousness of God required.

That attribute in God's character that expresses itself in retributive justice is also called *wrath*.

Wrath

A. *The reality of wrath* (Nahum 1:2-3a,6-8)

The doctrine or concept of *wrath* is thought by many to be beneath God. C. H. Dodd, for example, speaks for many when he says that the notion of divine wrath is *archaic* and that the biblical terminology refers to no more than "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." In other words, for such as Dodd, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

Clearly, Dodd and others misunderstand divine wrath. It is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. But divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who "rub Him the wrong way." Divine wrath is *righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.* Indeed, one may speak of **divine wrath** as a function of **divine love**! For God's wrath is His love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that

He reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. Packer explains:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Leon Morris agrees:

"Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences, and that is upon such a situation that God's grace supervenes. When the logic of the situation demands that He should take action against the sinner, and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin" (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 185).

B. *The vocabulary of wrath*

a. ***thumos*** - is a word derived from *thuo* which originally meant "a violent movement of air, water, the ground, animals, or men" (TDNT, III:167). It came to signify the panting rage which wells up in a man's body and spirit. Thus *thumos* came to mean passionate anger, arising and subsiding quickly. It occurs twice in Luke, five times in Paul, once in Hebrews, and ten times in Revelation. Outside of Revelation it is used for God's wrath only once (Rom. 2:8). In

Revelation it refers to God's wrath seven times, six of which have the qualifying phrase "of God" (14:10,19; 15:1,7; 16:1; 19:15).

b. **orge** - is a word much more suited to a description of God's wrath in the NT. It is derived from *orgao*, which speaks of "growing ripe" for something or "getting ready to bear". It thus gave *orge* the meaning of a settled disposition or emotion arising out of God's nature. It is specifically said to be "of God" in John 3:36 (on the lips of Jesus); Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 19:15. We read of the "wrath of the Lamb" in Rev. 6:16. See also Rev. 6:17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19.

See esp. Rev. 19:15 where John speaks of "the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty," where "fierce" is a translation of *thumos* and "wrath" is a translation of *orge*.

C. *The present revelation of wrath*

We read in Romans 1:18 that God's wrath *is being* revealed (present tense). Where or how? Options: 1) a futuristic present, hence referring to the final judgment; 2) the disease and disasters of earthly life; 3) given the parallel with v. 17 some have argued that just as the *righteousness* of God is revealed in the gospel so too is the *wrath* of God (i.e., the gospel is the proclamation of both grace and judgment, mercy and wrath); or more probably 4) God's wrath is revealed in the content of vv. 24-32. I.e., "the wrath of God is now visible in His abandonment of humanity to its chosen way of sin and all its consequences" (Moo, 96).

"The wrath which is being revealed," writes Cranfield, "is no nightmare of an indiscriminate, uncontrolled, irrational fury, but the wrath of the holy and merciful God called forth by, and directed against" men's ungodliness (sin is an attack on God's majesty) and unrighteousness (sin is a violation of God's will) (111).

D. *The future revelation of wrath*

See Romans 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 14:9-12.

C. An Example of Divine Justice and Wrath

See Deut. 7:1-11; 20:16-18; Joshua 6:21; 8:24-29; 11:10-15 (also Ex. 23:31-32; 34:12-16).

How do we explain the fact that God evidently commanded Israel to exterminate the entire population of Jericho: men, women, and children? Numerous attempts have been made to deal with this. For example:

(1) Some argue that the decision was Joshua's, which indicates that Israel was simply at a very primitive stage of development. The OT itself is thus a record of a crude, warlike tribe of Hebrews who were simply fighting for survival. But: read Deut. 7:1-2 and Joshua 10:40.

(2) Others insist that the God of the OT is not the God and Father of Jesus in the NT. The OT God is wrathful, vengeful, evil, and the NT God is loving and compassionate. But: Jesus himself identified the Father as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," not to mention the countless references *in the NT* to the wrath and righteous judgment of God.

(3) Some simply can't entertain the thought of God ordering such slaughter, so they deny that the OT is the inspired word of God. It is a merely human record of events in which a barbaric people tried to justify ruthless policies by appealing to divine sanction. But: Jesus' attitude to the OT must be noted (see Mt. 5; John 10; also 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

There is no escaping the fact that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ordered and sanctioned the extermination of the Canaanite people. Why? Can such a God be worshiped and adored?

We read about the "ban", i.e., the herem, a word that literally means "to separate". This was the practice in which people hostile to God

were designated as "off-limits" to Israel and were to be separated or devoted to judgment and destruction. See Josh. 6:17,18,21.

How do we explain this? If such were to occur today, Israel would be called before the World Court or the United Nations and charged with barbaric cruelty, unprovoked aggression, and would no doubt be condemned and isolated, perhaps even invaded by other nations. Our answer begins with seven observations.

First, Israel was not commanded to do this because of any moral superiority. See Deut. 9:5. Indeed, the same fate was threatened against Israel if she were to rebel (Deut. 8:19-20).

Second, the Canaanites were the most depraved, debauched, degenerate people of the ancient world. They regularly engaged in religious prostitution in which people fornicated with cult priests and priestesses, hoping thereby to encourage the gods to copulate and bring fruitfulness to the land. They practiced child sacrifice (infants and young children were sacrificed to the fire of the god Molech). They also gave themselves over to the sexual sins listed in Lev. 18. Thus, the Canaanites received everything they deserved. They received justice, Israel received mercy, but no one received injustice.

Third, the judgment came only after remarkable and gracious patience and opportunity for repentance. See Gen. 15:16. God had given the people in Canaan centuries to repent! But they presumed on God's patience and took it as indifference and indulged in even greater sin. See Joshua 2:10-14; 5:1; Jer. 18:7-10.

Fourth, the survival of both Israel and the world was at stake because of the pervasive and perverting influence of such sin. See Deut. 7:1-4. We know, in fact, that on those occasions when Israel did not obey God's order to exterminate the Canaanites, the latter polluted the former. The kings of Judah practiced child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). Sexual perversion was rampant (2 Kings 23:7). Israel practiced magic and necromancy (2 Kings 21:6), and even murdered the

prophets (Jer. 26:20-23). Other examples could be given. The point is this: God as the physician of mankind occasionally finds it necessary to amputate a leg that is gangrene in order to save the rest of the body.

Fifth, think of the flood of Noah! There we see the extermination of virtually the entire human race because of their sin, with the exception of eight souls.

Sixth, what God did in Canaan and Jericho is no different from he at other times does through providential disasters such as famine, floods, pestilence, tornados, earthquakes, etc.

Seventh, why do we object to God doing *during* history what we agree he will do at the *end* of history? If you think what God did at Jericho was unjust, what will you do with *hell*?

Many, though, are still uncomfortable with what they read in Deut. and Joshua. This is often because it assumed that all people have a fundamental right to life which even God himself must honor. Note well: we must distinguish between the "right to life" referred to in the pro-life movement and that which I describe here. No human has the right to take another human life unlawfully. The unborn child has a right, under law, to protection from murder. When a fetus dies from spontaneous miscarriage, we don't charge God with murder. Life belongs to God, not to man. When God gives life, we can't take it (except when Scripture says so: e.g., war, self-defense, capital punishment). But God can do with life whatever he pleases.

So we ask: "How could a just and loving God cause the extermination of innocent people in Jericho?" Answer: "He couldn't! He didn't!" The fact is, *not one innocent person in Jericho died*. See Gen. 18:23-25. Let me illustrate this point by directing your attention to the reality of OT death penalty.

In the Mosaic code, people could be executed for adultery, blasphemy, incorrigible juvenile delinquency, breaking the Sabbath,

homosexuality, rape, just a few of the 15-20 crimes for which one would suffer loss of life. But contrary to widespread perception, *the Mosaic Law actually represents a massive reduction in capital offenses from the original list*. As R. C. Sproul puts it, "the OT code represents a bending over backwards of divine patience and forbearance. ***The OT law is one of astonishing grace***" (*The Holiness of God*, p. 148).

The original law of the universe is that "the soul that sins, it shall die." Life is a divine gift, not a debt. Sin brings the loss of the gift of life. Once a person sins he forfeits any claim on God to human existence. The fact that we continue to exist after sinning is owing wholly to divine mercy and gracious longsuffering.

We recoil and are aghast at what we are convinced was undue cruelty and severity in the OT law. Why? Because we are twisted and confused in our thinking. *We think we deserve to live and that God owes us life*. The fact that God made only 15-20 sins capital offenses was a remarkable act of mercy, compassion and grace. Why? Because it would have been perfectly just and fair and righteous had he made *every* sin a capital offense. The Mosaic stipulations regarding the death penalty, therefore, were remarkably lenient and gracious.]

I would suggest, therefore, that the mystery in Jericho is not that God would exterminate them all, but that he didn't exterminate them all sooner than he did! We have arrogantly presumed on a mythical "right to life" and thus are shocked by death.

Read Luke 13:1-5. The cry is: "How could God let innocent bystanders die this way?" Jesus might have responded: "I'm so sorry. It was an accident. My Father was tired from a long night of running the world and he momentarily fell asleep. Or maybe he was counting hairs on heads or watching sparrows fall or busy on the other side of the globe." No. Rather, he says: "Unless you repent, you too will perish!" In other words, they asked the wrong question. They should have asked: "Why didn't that tower fall on *me*?"

The fact that we draw breath this moment is *an act of mercy, not justice*.

Is the God of Love also a God of Wrath?

Biblical passages such as Hebrews 10:26-31 make a lot of people extremely uncomfortable with its talk of judgment (v. 27a), the fury of fire consuming sinful people (v. 27b), punishment (v. 29a), and vengeance (v. 30).

It's easy to think about and even to preach on the subject of God as love. Grace and mercy are not difficult topics. Forgiveness and salvation are among our favorite biblical themes. But when it comes to the idea of judgment and the suggestion that this God of love and mercy is also a God of wrath and vengeance, well, that's another matter. After all, no one criticizes God for being kind and merciful. But we live in a day when people jump at the opportunity to pass judgment on God's character whenever his holiness and righteous anger are the topic of discussion.

The doctrine or concept of divine wrath and anger is thought by many to be beneath God. Some have insisted that the notion of divine wrath is archaic and that the biblical terminology refers to no more than "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe." In other words, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

People who take this view have clearly misunderstood what the Bible has in view when it speaks of judgment and divine wrath. It is not the

loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who "rub him the wrong way." Divine wrath is righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will. Indeed, one may speak of divine wrath as a function of divine love! For God's wrath is his love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains it this way:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Think about this for just a moment. If you and I do not deserve to suffer divine wrath for our sins, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. If there is no such thing as judgment, God ought to overlook our sin. Forgiveness is real and meaningful only when we believe that our sin has put us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences for our unbelief and immoral behavior. When a situation demands that God should take action **against** sinful people in judgment and instead he takes action **for** them, the word grace actually means something. But if there is no such thing as the judgment of God's wrath for sin and unbelief, grace loses all meaning and significance.

Whatever your view of God, the Creator of the universe and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, if it does not include a healthy confession that he is holy and righteous and will pour out wrath and judgment on those who persist in their rejection of him, it is an unbiblical and unrealistic view. In fact, it is an unloving view. For if you communicate to non-Christians that they should repent and

believe the gospel, but if they don't, "Aw, don't worry about it, God will figure out a way to embrace you in spite of your unbelief," you are treating that person with contempt. You are leaving them vulnerable to eternal damnation with the false hope of a God who is too loving ever to consign anyone to hell.

As John Piper has said, "The love of God provides escape from the wrath of God by sacrificing the Son of God to vindicate the glory of God in forgiving sinners. That's the gospel." But for those who spurn the provision of God's love in Christ there is only a fearful expectation of judgment.

So let me be as clear as I can be. I will not apologize for God's wrath. I am not embarrassed by God's wrath. If the God of the Bible didn't care about sexual abuse and injustice and theft and murder and idolatry, he's not worthy of anyone's worship. If the God of the Bible is unmoved by and indifferent toward racism and perversion and abortion and rape and dishonesty, he's not worthy of anyone's praise. Righteous anger against sin is absolutely essential to God being God. Punishment for human wickedness and wrath poured out on unrepentant rebels is part of what it means to be holy. And I will not ignore or tip-toe around what the Bible says on this matter in order not to offend people or to ensure that people who give financially continue to do so.

The God of the Bible, the only true God, is indescribably patient and kind and compassionate and loving and gracious and merciful. But that doesn't mean he's soft on sin or akin to that coddling, overly-indulgent grandfather who lets you get away with stuff your parents would never allow. God is holy and righteous and just and bears no resemblance to some doting, spineless uncle who lacks the will to hold anyone accountable for their actions.

So let me conclude with a few important observations.

First, the wrath and righteous anger of God is not merely an OT doctrine. People mistakenly think that the so-called “God of the Old Testament” was an angry ogre who bears little resemblance to the God of the NT. But this fails to recognize that the OT is filled with descriptions of God’s compassion and longsuffering and mercy and tender-hearted ways. And the NT is likewise filled with passages like Hebrews 10 which speak unapologetically of divine wrath. And may I remind you of what will happen at the Second Coming of Christ? We read in Revelation 19:15, “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”

Second, we need to thank God for his wrath. That’s right. You should thank God and praise him for his wrath. To think that unrepentant and stubbornly defiant rebels might never be called to account for their deeds and never face the judgment they deserve is horrific. I’m grateful to God that, if not in this life then certainly in the next, and for eternity, those who hate him and perpetrate unimaginable wickedness on this earth will be judged.

Third, we must always praise and glorify God for his amazing grace that has made it possible for us to be spared this wrath. His wrath has been poured out on Jesus and altogether satisfied for those who put their trust in him as Lord and Savior. Yes, we are among the perpetrators of evil and abuse and wickedness in the earth, but if you look to God’s mercy for you in the death of Jesus you will find forgiveness. God’s wrath wasn’t set aside or ignored when it comes to the sins of Christians. It was fully and finally and forever poured out on his Son who endured for sinners what they otherwise should have suffered. And thus we sing:

In Christ alone, who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe!

This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones he came to save.

Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied,
For every sin on him was laid, here in the death of Christ, I live!

Is God a Jealous Lover?

So why does God care so much about whether you and I love him preeminently, indeed exclusively? What does it matter? In James 4:4-6 we are told that people who flirt with the world and, as it were, “jump into bed with other gods,” are guilty of spiritual adultery. That almost seems a bit extreme, doesn’t it? No, not once you realize that God is a jealous lover! Or, to use the words of James himself, God “yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us” (James 4:5b).

The point is that God is jealous for the full and undivided devotion of your heart. God will brook no rivals in his love relationship with you.

Before you overreact to my suggestion that God is a jealous lover, it’s important to remember that jealousy can be both good and bad. Jealousy can be driven or motivated both by holy and righteous motives as well as unholy and unrighteous ones. Jealousy can be a sign of both sinful weakness and strength, of both wounded pride, on the one hand, and genuine love, on the other. Jealously is sometimes the expression of an excessively possessive spirit, and at other times the fruit of care and concern for the welfare of the one who is loved. Jealousy is often the result of deep insecurity in a person’s soul, but also a reflection of commitment and devotion to the person that you love.

We all know this, and we’ve all undoubtedly felt the surge and sensation of jealousy in our hearts at some time or another during the course of our relationship with certain individuals. My guess is

that we often times can't even discern whether or not our jealous rage is righteous or wicked. The so-called "green-eyed-monster" is on occasion a cute, cuddly pet, while at other times it can be a vicious and carnivorous creature that devours and destroys. That is why Christians are often stumped and confused when they read all through the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, that God is a jealous God! If that sounds offensive to you, consider these texts:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:4-6).

Remarkably, it isn't to his righteousness or holiness or justice or majesty or sovereignty or any other attribute that God appeals, but to his jealousy.

"For you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exod. 34:14; see Num. 25:11).

Holy jealousy is central to the fundamental essence of who God is. ***Jealousy is at the core of God's identity as God. Jealousy is that defining characteristic or personality trait that makes God God.*** Whatever other reasons you may find in Scripture for worshiping and serving and loving God alone, and there are many of them and they are all good, paramount among them all is the fact that our God burns with jealousy for the undivided allegiance and affection of his people. Here are a few other texts:

"You shall not go after other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are around you – for the Lord your God in your midst is a jealous God – lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled

against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth" (Deut. 6:14-15; cf. 4:24; 29:20; 32:16,21; Joshua 24:19; see also 1 Kings 14:22; Psalm 78:58; Ezek. 16:38,42; 23:25; 36:5ff; 38:19; 39:25; Joel 2:18; Nahum 1:2; Zeph. 1:18; 3:8; Zech. 1:14; 8:2; Ps. 79:5).

God is an emotional being. He experiences within the depths of his being genuine passions. The Bible is replete with references to divine joy, mercy, love, compassion, kindness, hatred, just to mention a few. But what of jealousy? The fact that we balk at the suggestion that God might be truly jealous indicates that we have a weak, insipid view of the divine nature. At the very core of his being, in the center of his personality is an inextinguishable blaze of immeasurable love called jealousy.

To say that God is jealous certainly does not mean that he is suspicious because of some insecurity in his heart. This kind of jealousy is the result of ignorance and mistrust. Such is surely not true of God. Nor does it mean he is wrongfully envious of the success of others. Jealousy that is sinful is most often the product of anxiety and bitterness and fear. But surely none of this could be true of God. Sinful jealousy is the sort that longs to possess and control what does not properly belong to oneself; it is demanding and cares little for the supposed object of its love.

Divine jealousy is a zeal to protect a love relationship or to avenge it when it is broken. Jealousy in God is that passionate energy by which he is provoked and stirred and moved to take action against whatever or whoever stands in the way of his enjoyment of what he loves and desires. The intensity of God's anger at threats to this relationship is directly proportionate to the depths of his love.

James wants us to understand that God is jealous for the devotion and wholeheartedness and loyalty and love of his bride, his people. Just as a husband cannot be indulgent of adultery in his wife, so also God cannot and will not endure infidelity in us. What would we think

of a man or woman who does not experience jealous feelings when another person approaches his/her spouse and threatens to win their affection? We would regard such a person as deficient in moral character and lacking in true love.

So the next time you feel tempted to flirt with the world or to give your affections to anything or anyone other than God, remember that his heart burns with jealous commitment to you and a deep and passionate love that will brook no rival suitors.

The Omniscience of God

"Great is our Lord and mighty in power;

his understanding has no limit" (Ps. 147:5)

There is a growing trend among evangelicals to significantly redefine the content of divine omniscience by eliminating divine foreknowledge. This attempt to reshape the historical orthodox view of God must be addressed. Before doing so, we must first examine the biblical evidence for the nature and extent of God's knowledge.

A. God's Knowledge and Ours

It will help to begin by noting how God's knowledge differs from ours.

1. *God's knowledge is intuitive, not discursive* - Our knowledge is discursive in that it comes by way of observation, reasoning, comparison, induction, deduction, and so on. In other words, *we*

learn. But God's knowledge is intuitive, by which is meant that it is innate and immediate. God does not learn: He simply knows. He neither discovers nor forgets. [This is one element of divine omniscience that is challenged by open theists.]

2. *God's knowledge is simultaneous, not successive* - He sees things at once and in their totality, whereas we know only as the objects of knowledge are brought before us, one bit after another. With God the act of perception is complete and instantaneous. God thinks about all things at once.

"If he [God] should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was something he had not thought about for a time. Rather, he knows all things at once. All of these facts and all other things that he knows are always fully present in his consciousness" (Grudem, 191).

3. *God's knowledge is independent, not dependent* - He does not receive his knowledge from anyone or anything external to himself:

"Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding?" (Isa. 40:13-14).

4. *God's knowledge is infallible, not subject to error* - As Ronald Nash has said, "Divine omniscience means that God holds no false beliefs. Not only are all of God's beliefs true, the range of his knowledge is total; He knows all true propositions" (51). God is always correct in what he knows.

5. *God's knowledge is infinite, not partial* - "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). God's knows exhaustively all his own deeds and plans. He also knows us

thoroughly and exhaustively. No secret of the human heart, no thought of the mind or feeling of the soul escapes his gaze. Carl Henry points out: "Psychologists and psychoanalysts speak of deep areas of subconscious experience of which human beings are hardly aware. But God knows all men thoroughgoingly, psychologists and psychoanalysts and theologians included" (V:268).

Consider David's description of God's knowledge as found in Psalm 139:1-4.

"O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me. Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up; Thou dost understand my thought from afar. Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, and art intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou dost know it all" (Ps. 139:1-4).

- "Searching" is an anthropomorphic image, for "God knows all things naturally and as a matter of course, and not by any effort on his part. Searching ordinarily implies a measure of ignorance which is removed by observation; of course this is not the case with the Lord; but the meaning of the Psalmist is, that the Lord knows us thoroughly as if he had examined us minutely, and had pried into the most secret corners of our being" (Spurgeon, 258).

- David's choice of words is designed to encompass the totality of his life's activities. God's knowledge extends to every posture, gesture, exercise, pursuit, state, and condition possible. "When I am active and when I am passive and everything in between . . . Thou knowest it all! My most common and casual acts, my most needful and trivial moments . . . none escape Thine eye!" David employs a figure of speech called *merism*, in which polar opposites are used to indicate the totality of all generically related acts, events, localities, and so on.

- Every emotion, feeling, idea, thought, conception, resolve, aim, doubt, motive, perplexity, and anxious moment lies before You like an open book. And you all this "from afar"! The distance between heaven and earth by which men vainly imagine God's knowledge to be circumscribed (limited, bounded) offers no obstacle.
- "Though my thought be invisible to the sight, though as yet I be not myself cognizant of the shape it is assuming, yet thou hast it under thy consideration, and thou perceivest its nature, its source, its drift, its result. Never dost thou misjudge or wrongly interpret me; my inmost thought is perfectly understood by thine impartial mind. Though thou shouldest give but a glance at my heart, and see me as one sees a passing meteor moving afar, yet thou wouldst by that glimpse sum up all the meanings of my soul, so transparent is everything to thy piercing glance" (Spurgeon, 259).
- "All my ways" = every step, every move, every journey, all are under His gaze. What possible hope of concealment is there when God knows what we will say before we do?
- Note especially the implications of v. 4 for divine foreknowledge: before we utter a word, God knows it all (thoroughly, completely, accurately).

Other relevant texts include:

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13).

"And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts" (1 Chron. 28:9a).

"The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Prov. 15:3).

"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? 'I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve'" (Jer. 17:9-10; cf. also Jer. 16:17; 1 Kings 8:39).

"You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you" (Ps. 69:5).

"Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt. 6:8).

" . . . for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (1 John 3:20).

"Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord, how much more the hearts of men!" ([Prov. 15:11](#)).

"Yet Thou, O Lord, knowest all their deadly designs against me; do not forgive their iniquity or blot out their sin from Thy sight" (Jer. 18:23).

"Yet, O Lord of hosts, Thou who dost test the righteous, who seest the mind [lit., kidneys] and the heart . . ." (Jer. 20:12).

"And they prayed, and said, 'Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen" (Acts 1:24).

"Then the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me, and He said to me, 'Say, thus says the Lord, so you think, house of Israel, for I know your thoughts'" (Ezek. 11:5).

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God'? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable" (Isa. 40:27-28).

As for God's knowledge of the inner man, see also John 2:25; 21:17; Jer. 11:20; 32:19; Luke 16:15; Rom. 8:27; Ps. 94:9-11; 1 Cor. 3:20; 1 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:23; 1 Sam. 16:7; Isa. 66:18; Deut. 31:21; Mt. 9:4; Acts 15:8.

As for God's knowledge of all our activities and ways, see also Job 23:10; 24:23; 31:4; Ps. 1:6; 33:13-15; 37:18; 119:168; Isa. 29:15; 1 Sam. 2:3; Mt. 10:30.

B. *Does God Know Everything?*

Some argue there are things God does not, indeed cannot, know. Since God does not have a physical body (at least prior to the incarnation), it would seem he cannot know anything that is known through the use of the five senses. He cannot know what it is to feel hot or cold. He cannot smell a rose or hear a symphony or taste food, at least not in the way those who do so through physical sense organs do. Feinberg thus defines omniscience:

“Divine omniscience is ability to know everything that a being with God’s attributes can know. Since his attributes are all perfections, they do not likely preclude his knowing something he should know as the maximally-great being” (*No One Like Him*, 325).

Do you agree?

C. *Divine Foreknowledge*

Four views of divine foreknowledge:

1. Open Theism – God knows both the past and present in exhaustive detail but knows the future only to the degree that the future is logically knowable. God can foreknow what he, God, intends to do independent of human involvement. But God cannot know what we, humans, will do until we do it. God knows the range of possibilities and potentialities but not actualities, insofar as the latter do not exist as objects of knowledge until such time as free moral

agents bring them into being. Hence the future is truly “open” for both God and humans.

2. Simple Foreknowledge – Those who advocate this view contend that God “simply” knows what is going to come to pass. The future is not “open” from God’s perspective, but neither is God’s foreknowledge based on his foreordination. God “simply” foreknows what free agents will do.

3. Middle Knowledge – Advocates of this view argue that God foreknows not only what *will* come to pass but also what *would have* come to pass under any and all circumstances in any and all possible worlds. God chose to create *this* world because he foresaw that what would come to pass in *it*, as compared with all other possible worlds, best served his objective of glorifying himself while preserving the freedom of his creatures. This view is based on the belief that God has eternal knowledge of how free moral agents would act in all possible circumstances in all possible worlds.

4. Calvinist View – God *foreknows* everything that will come to pass in the future because he has *foreordained* everything that comes to pass. Humans are free moral agents insofar as they act voluntarily according to their desires. But all such desires and subsequent volitional activity fall within the sovereign and pre-temporal (or eternal) purpose of God.

D. *Practical Implications*

Consider how the doctrine of divine omniscience ought to affect our worship and adoration of God:

“Consider how great it is to know the thoughts and intentions, and works of one man from the beginning to the end of his life; to foreknow all these before the being of this man, when he was lodged afar off in the loins of his ancestors, yea, of Adam. How much greater is it to foreknow and know the thoughts and works of three or four men, of a whole village or neighbourhood! It is greater still to know

the imaginations and actions of such a multitude of men as are contained in London, Paris, or Constantinople; how much greater still to know the intentions and practices, the clandestine contrivances of so many millions, that have, do, or shall swarm in all quarters of the world, every person of them having millions of thoughts, desires, designs, affections, and actions! Let this attribute, then, make the blessed God honourable in our eyes and adorable in all our affections. . . . *Adore God for this wonderful perfection!*" (Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, pp. 239-40).

A proper understanding of this divine attribute ought also to have a profound impact on our humility. Charnock explains:

"There is nothing man is more apt to be proud of than his knowledge; it is a perfection he glories in; but if our own knowledge of the little outside and barks of things puffs us up, the consideration of the infiniteness of God's knowledge should abate the tumor. As our beings are nothing in regard to the infiniteness of his essence, so our knowledge is nothing in regard of the vastness of his understanding. We have a spark of being, but nothing to the heat of the sun; we have a drop of knowledge, but nothing to the divine ocean. What a vain thing is it for a shallow brook to boast of its streams, before a sea whose depths are unfathomable! As it is a vanity to brag of our strength when we remember the power of God, and of our prudence when we glance upon the wisdom of God, so it is no less a vanity to boast of our knowledge when we think of the understanding and knowledge of God" (240).

What is our response when we think of God's knowledge of the secrets of our hearts? What impact does this have on holiness?

"Can a man's conscience easily and delightfully swallow that which he is sensible falls under the cognizance of God, when it is hateful to the eye of his holiness, and renders the actor odious to him? . . . Temptations have no encouragement to come near him that is

constantly armed with the thoughts that his sin is booked in God's omniscience" (258).

What is even more glorious is that this doctrine which makes us fearful of sin is also the foundation of comfort and assurance. If God is omniscient, then he knows the worst about us, but loves us notwithstanding! The apostle John writes: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19-20).

Finally, our trust and hope shall not disappoint, for they are in him who knows all things. Charnock again explains:

"This perfection of God fits him to be a special object of trust. If he were forgetful, what comfort could we have in any promise? How could we depend upon him if he were ignorant of our state? His compassions to pity us, his readiness to relieve us, his power to protect and assist us, would be insignificant, without his omniscience to inform his goodness and direct the arm of his power. . . . You may depend upon his mercy that hath promised, and upon his truth to perform, upon his sufficiency to supply you and his goodness to relieve you, and his righteousness to reward you, because he hath an infinite understanding to know you and your wants, you and your services" (249).

Appendix

10 Things You should Know about the Immutability of God

Some see the concept of immutability as a threat to the biblical portrait of God who appears in some sense to change. Others are equally concerned that a careless tampering with this attribute of God will reduce him to a fickle, unfaithful, and ultimately unworthy object of our affection and worship. It is imperative, therefore, that we proceed cautiously, and yet with conviction, in articulating these ten truths about divine immutability.

(1) To say that God is immutable is to declare that *his character is eternally consistent*. Immutability means that God is consistently the same in his eternal moral being. He will never get “better” than he has been for eternity. He will by no means ever get “worse”.

(2) This affirmation of unchangeableness, however, is not designed to deny that there is change and development in God's relations to his creatures. We who were once his enemies are now by the grace of Christ his friends (Rom. 5:6-11). Divine immutability must never be interpreted in such a way that the reality of the "Word became flesh" is threatened (John 1:14). We must acknowledge that he who is in his eternal being very God became, in space-time history, very man. Yet the Word who became flesh did not cease to be the Word. The second person of the Trinity has taken unto himself or assumed a human nature, yet without alteration or reduction of his essential deity. He is now what he has always been: very God. He is now what he once was not: very man. He is now and forever will be both: the God-man.

(3) To say that God is immutable is not to say that he is immobile or static, for whereas all change is activity, not all activity is change. It is simply to affirm that God always is and acts in perfect harmony with the revelation of himself and his will in Scripture.

For example, Scripture tells us that God is good, just, and loving. Immutability, or constancy, simply asserts that when the circumstances in any situation call for goodness, justice, or love as the appropriate response on the part of the Deity, that is precisely what God will be (or do, as the case maybe). To say the same thing, but negatively, if God ought to be good, just, or loving as the circumstances may demand, or as his promises would require, he will by no means ever be evil, unfair, or hateful. Immutability means that the God who in Scripture is said to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, has not, is not, and never will be under any and all imaginable circumstances, localized, ignorant, or impotent. What he is, he always is.

(4) God is immutable in respect to his essential being. Immutability is a property which belongs to the divine essence in the sense that God can neither gain new attributes, which he didn't have before, nor lose those already his. To put it crudely, *God doesn't grow*. There is no increase or decrease in the Divine Being. He neither evolves nor devolves. His attributes, considered individually, can never be greater or less than what they are and have always been. God will never be wiser, more loving, more powerful, or holier than he ever has been and ever must be (Exod. 3:14; Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17).

(5) God's life is immutable, which is to say he eternally is. God never began to be nor will he ever cease to be. His life simply is. He did not come into existence (for to become existent is a change from nothing to something), nor will he go out of existence (for to cease existing is a change from something to nothing). God is not young or old. He simply is (Exod. 3:14; Ps. 90:2; 93:2; 102:25-27).

(6) God is immutable with respect to his plan in redemptive history. There are only two reasons why God would ever be forced or need to alter his purpose: (a) if he lacked the necessary foresight or knowledge to anticipate any and all contingencies (in which case he would not be omniscient); or (b) assuming he had the needed

foresight, he lacked the power or ability to effect what he had planned (in which case he would not be omnipotent).

But since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no error or oversight in the conception of his purpose. Also, since he is infinite in power (omnipotent), there can be no failure or frustration in the accomplishment of his purpose.

The many and varied changes in the relationship that God sustains to his creatures, as well as the more conspicuous events of redemptive history, are not to be thought of as indicating a change in God's being or purpose. They are, rather, the execution in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God. For example, the abolition of the Mosaic Covenant was no change in God's will; it was, in fact, the fulfillment of his will, an eternal will which decreed change (i.e., change from the Mosaic to the New Covenant). Christ's coming and work were no makeshift action to remedy unforeseen defects in the Old Testament scheme. They were but the realization (historical and concrete) of what God had from eternity decreed. See Ps. 33:10-11; 110:4; Isa. 14:24; 46:9-11; 48:8-11; Prov. 19:21; Job 23:13; 42:2; Heb. 6:17.

(7) Two passages should always be kept in mind when speaking of God's immutability:

"God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Num. 23:19).

"So Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind' (1 Sam. 15:28-29).

(8) A proper and biblical grasp of divine immutability must recognize the difference between ***unconditional divine decrees*** and

conditional divine announcements (or warnings). The former will occur irrespective of other factors. The latter may occur, dependent on the response of the person or persons to whom they apply. Examples of an unconditional decree would be Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Psalm 110:4; Jeremiah 4:28; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14. Examples of conditional announcements or warnings would be Exodus 32:12,14; Amos 7:3,6; Jeremiah 15:6; 18:8,10; 26:3,13,19; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2.

(9) A principle of God's immutable being (as revealed by him in Scripture) is that he punishes the wicked and recalcitrant but blesses and forgives the righteous and repentant. If God were to reveal himself as such (as, in fact, he has done), only to punish the repentant and bless the recalcitrant, this would constitute real change and thus destroy immutability. God's declaration of intent to punish the Ninevites because of their sinful behavior and wickedness is based on the assumption that they are and will remain wicked. However, if and when they repent (as they did), to punish them notwithstanding would constitute a change, indeed reversal, in God's will and word, to the effect that he now, as over against the past, punishes rather than blesses the repentant. See especially Jeremiah 18:5-12.

(10) What all this means, very simply, is that ***God is dependable!*** Our trust in him is therefore a confident trust, for we know that he will not, indeed cannot, change. His purposes are unfailing, his promises unassailable. It is because the God who promised us eternal life is immutable that we may rest assured that nothing, not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword shall separate us from the love of Christ. It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever that neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, not even powers, height, depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39)!

10 Things You should Know about God's Omnipresence

The word “omnipresence” refers to the truth that God is everywhere: from here in the room where I sit to beyond the galaxies that the Hubble telescope is able to probe. Let’s look at ten things we should know about this attribute of God.

(1) The best place to begin in thinking about divine omnipresence is the very personal affirmation of it by David in Psalm 139. There he writes: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps. 139:7-12).

(2) We should probably draw a slight distinction between immensity and omnipresence. Whereas immensity affirms that God transcends all spatial limitations, that his being cannot be contained or localized, omnipresence signifies more specifically the relationship which God in his whole being sustains to the creation itself. In other words, omnipresence (being positive in thrust) means that God is everywhere present in the world; immensity (being negative in thrust) means that he is by no means limited to or confined by it.

(3) Divine omnipresence means that it is inappropriate to speak of God as having size, for this term implies something that is measurable, definable, with boundaries and limitations. Is the question, then, “How big is God?” theologically inappropriate? Probably.

(4) God is not “in space” in the sense that, say, we or the angelic host are. We who have material bodies are bounded by space and thus can always be said to be here and not there, or there and not here. That is, a body occupies a place in space. Angelic spirits, on the other hand, as well as the dead in Christ now in the intermediate state, are not bound by space and yet they are somewhere, not everywhere. But God, and God alone, fills all space. He is not absent from any portion of space, nor more present in one portion than in another. To put it in other terms, we are in space circumscriptively, angels are in space definitively, but God is in space repletively.

(5) God is omnipresent according to his being and not merely according to his operation. That is to say, he is essentially or substantially, not only dynamically, omnipresent. It is the heresy of deism which contends that God is present in all places only by way of influence and power, acting upon the world from a distance, but not himself wholly present throughout.

(6) Although God is wholly present throughout all things, he is yet distinct from all things. It does not follow that because God is essentially in everything that everything is essentially God. It is the heresy of pantheism that the being of God is one and the same with the being of all reality. Pantheism asserts that God minus the world = 0; theism asserts that God minus the world = God. The universe is the creation of God and thus, in respect to essence, no part of him. The creation is ontologically other than God, a product ex nihilo of the divine will, not an extension of the Divine Being itself. Consequently, although all things are permeated and sustained in being by God (Col. 1:16-17; Acts 17:28), God is not all things.

(7) God is **not** present **at** each point in space but rather present **with/in** each point in space.

(8) This presence of God throughout the whole of space is not by local diffusion, multiplication, or distribution. Being wholly spirit, God is not subject to the laws of matter such as extension and displacement. He cannot be divided or separated such that one part of his being is here and not there, and another part there and not here. The whole of his being is always everywhere, no less nor more here than there, or there than here.

(9) Whereas the presence of a body in a place of space excludes the simultaneous and in all ways identical presence of another body in the same place of space, such is not true of the Divine Being. God is, in the whole of his being, where everything else is (including matter). Substance or matter is in no way displaced or spatially excluded by the presence of God. To put it bluntly, when God created all things out of nothing, he did not have to “move out of the way” to make room for the world. He is where it is.

(10) The teaching of Scripture on God's omnipresence is unassailable. In addition to what we have already seen in Psalm 139, note the following:

"Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the LORD" (Jer. 23:24).

"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27; see also 2 Chron. 2:6; Isa. 66 :1).

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph. 1:22-23).

"For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28a).

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together"
(Col. 1:17).

10 Things You should Know about God's Omniscience

The psalmist declares that our Lord is great “and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (Psalm 147:5). We often talk about what we know and how we know, but rarely stop and ask: How does God know? What does God know? So today we turn our attention to ten things we should know about God’s knowledge.

(1) God's knowledge is intuitive, not discursive. When I say that our knowledge is discursive I mean that it comes to us by way of observation, reasoning, comparison, induction, deduction, and so on. In other words, we learn. But God's knowledge is intuitive, by which is meant that it is innate and immediate. ***God does not learn: he simply knows. He neither discovers nor forgets.***

(2) We should also remember that God's knowledge is simultaneous, not successive. He sees things at once and in their totality, whereas we know only as the objects of knowledge are brought before us, one bit after another. With God the act of perception is complete and instantaneous. ***God thinks about all things at once.***

(3) We also know from Scripture that God's knowledge is independent, not dependent. He does not receive his knowledge from anyone or from anything external to himself. Isaiah asked this: “Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him

his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?" (Isa. 40:13-14). The answer, of course, is no one!

(4) God's knowledge is infallible, not subject to error. As Ronald Nash has said, "Divine omniscience means that God holds no false beliefs. Not only are all of God's beliefs true, the range of his knowledge is total; he knows all true propositions" (51). ***God is always correct in what he knows.***

(5) God's knowledge is infinite, not partial. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). God knows exhaustively all his own deeds and plans. He also knows us thoroughly and exhaustively. No secret of the human heart, no thought of the mind or feeling of the soul escapes his gaze. See 1 Chron. 28:9a; Prov. 15:3; Ps. 69:5; 139:1-4; Isa. 40:27-28; Ezek. 11:5; Jer. 17:9-10; 1 Kings 8:39; Matt. 6:8; Acts 1:24; Heb. 4:13; 1 John 3:20.

(6) God has exhaustive foreknowledge over all things that come to pass, including the morally accountable choices made by men and women. God issues a challenge to all so-called other deities: "Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any" ([Isa. 44:7-8](#)). God alone declares what is to come. God alone knows the future, for God alone has ordained it.

(7) The truth of God's omniscience should affect our worship and adoration of him. Stephen Charnock put it this way:

"Consider how great it is to know the thoughts and intentions, and works of one man from the beginning to the end of his life; to foreknow all these before the being of this man, when he was

lodged afar off in the loins of his ancestors, yea, of Adam. How much greater is it to foreknow and know the thoughts and works of three or four men, of a whole village or neighbourhood! It is greater still to know the imaginations and actions of such a multitude of men as are contained in London, Paris, or Constantinople; how much greater still to know the intentions and practices, the clandestine contrivances of so many millions, that have, do, or shall swarm in all quarters of the world, every person of them having millions of thoughts, desires, designs, affections, and actions! Let this attribute, then, make the blessed God honourable in our eyes and adorable in all our affections. . . . Adore God for this wonderful perfection!” (Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, pp. 239-40).

(8) A proper understanding of God’s understanding ought also to have a profound impact on our humility. Charnock explains:

“There is nothing man is more apt to be proud of than his knowledge; it is a perfection he glories in; but if our own knowledge of the little outside and barks of things puffs us up, the consideration of the infiniteness of God’s knowledge should abate the tumor. As our beings are nothing in regard to the infiniteness of his essence, so our knowledge is nothing in regard of the vastness of his understanding. We have a spark of being, but nothing to the heat of the sun; we have a drop of knowledge, but nothing to the divine ocean. What a vain thing is it for a shallow brook to boast of its streams, before a sea whose depths are unfathomable! As it is a vanity to brag of our strength when we remember the power of God, and of our prudence when we glance upon the wisdom of God, so it is no less a vanity to boast of our knowledge when we think of the understanding and knowledge of God” (240).

(9) God’s knowledge of the secrets of our hearts should have a profound influence on our personal and practical holiness:

“Can a man’s conscience easily and delightfully swallow that which he is sensible falls under the cognizance of God, when it is hateful to the eye of his holiness, and renders the actor odious to him? . . . Temptations have no encouragement to come near him that is constantly armed with the thoughts that his sin is booked in God’s omniscience” (258).

(10) What is even more glorious is that this doctrine which makes us fearful of sin is also the foundation of comfort and assurance. If God is omniscient, then he knows the worst about us, but loves us notwithstanding! The apostle John writes: “This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything” (1 John 3:19-20).

10 Things You Should Know about the Wrath of God

Many would prefer that we only speak of God’s love and grace. But apart from the reality of divine wrath neither love nor grace makes much sense. We’ll see this as we explore ten things that every Christian should know about the wrath of God.

(1) Some less-than-evangelical theologians have argued that the doctrine or concept of wrath is beneath the dignity of God. C. H. Dodd, for example, speaks for many when he says that the notion of divine wrath is archaic and that the biblical terminology refers to no more than “an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.” In other words, for such as Dodd, divine wrath is an impersonal force operative in a moral universe, not a personal attribute or disposition in the character of God. Wrath may well be

ordained and controlled by God, but is clearly no part of him, as are love, mercy, kindness, etc.

(2) Opposition to the concept of divine wrath is often due to a misunderstanding of what it is. Wrath is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who “rub him the wrong way.”

(3) Divine wrath is righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.

(4) There is a very real sense in which one may speak of divine wrath as a function of divine love. God's wrath is his love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

Leon Morris agrees:

"Then, too, unless we give a real content to the wrath of God, unless we hold that men really deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their wrongdoing, we empty God's forgiveness of its meaning. For if there is no ill desert, God ought to overlook sin. We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences, and that is upon such a situation that God's grace supervenes. When the logic of the situation demands that He

should take action against the sinner, and He yet takes action for him, then and then alone can we speak of grace. But there is no room for grace if there is no suggestion of dire consequences merited by sin" (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 185).

(5) One common biblical term for wrath is *thumos*, a word derived from *thuo* which originally meant "a violent movement of air, water, the ground, animals, or men" (TDNT, III:167). It came to signify the panting rage which wells up in a man's body and spirit. Thus *thumos* came to mean passionate anger, arising and subsiding quickly. It occurs twice in Luke, five times in Paul, once in Hebrews, and ten times in Revelation. Outside of Revelation it is used for God's wrath only once (Rom. 2:8). In Revelation it refers to God's wrath seven times, six of which have the qualifying phrase "of God" (14:10,19; 15:1,7; 16:1; 19:15).

(6) A word much more suited to a description of God's wrath in the NT is *orge*. It is derived from *orgao*, which speaks of "growing ripe" for something or "getting ready to bear." It thus gave *orge* the meaning of a settled disposition or emotion arising out of God's nature. It is specifically said to be "of God" in John 3:36 (on the lips of Jesus); Rom. 1:18; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; Rev. 19:15. We read of the "wrath of the Lamb" in Rev. 6:16. See also Rev. 6:17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19.

Revelation 19:15 is especially instructive, as John speaks of "the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty," where "fierce" is a translation of *thumos* and "wrath" is a translation of *orge*.

(7) Wrath is even now, presently, being revealed and expressed by God.

We read in Romans 1:18 that God's wrath is being revealed (present tense). There are several ways of understanding this verse. This may be a futuristic present, hence referring to the final judgment. It is also possible that Paul has in mind the disease and disasters of

earthly life. Given the parallel with v. 17 some have argued that just as the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel so too is the wrath of God (i.e., the gospel is the proclamation of both grace and judgment, mercy and wrath). The most probable explanation is that God's wrath is revealed in the content of Romans 1:24-32. In other words, "the wrath of God is now visible in His abandonment of humanity to its chosen way of sin and all its consequences" (Moo, 96).

"The wrath which is being revealed," writes Cranfield, "is no nightmare of an indiscriminate, uncontrolled, irrational fury, but the wrath of the holy and merciful God called forth by, and directed against" men's ungodliness (sin is an attack on God's majesty) and unrighteousness (sin is a violation of God's will) (111).

(8) Divine wrath will also be revealed in the future, as we see in Romans 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 2 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 14:9-12.

(9) When we envision God as filled with wrath against sin and evil we should understand this as an expression of his justice. When we speak about the justice of God, we have in mind the idea that God always acts in perfect conformity and harmony with his own character. Some suggest that justice is thus a synonym for righteousness. Whatever God is, says, or does, by virtue of the fact that it is God, makes it righteous. Right and wrong are simply, and respectively, what God either commands or forbids. In other words, God doesn't do or command something because it is right. It is right because it is done or commanded by God. Righteousness or rectitude or good do not exist independently of God as a law or rule or standard to which God adheres or conforms. Rather, righteousness or rectitude or good are simply God acting and speaking.

Justice, therefore, is God acting and speaking in conformity with who he is. To say that God is just is to say that he acts and speaks consistently with whatever his righteous nature requires. To be unjust is to act and speak inconsistently with whatever his righteous

nature requires. That, of course, is a contradiction. That would be to assert that the righteous God acts unrighteously. By definition, that is impossible.

(10) When we speak of divine wrath as one facet of divine justice our primary concern is with what has been called the retributive justice of God, or that which God's nature requires him to require of his creatures. Retributive justice is that in virtue of which God gives to each of us that which is our due. It is that in virtue of which God treats us according to our deserts. Retributive justice is thus somewhat synonymous with punishment. This is a necessary expression of God's reaction to sin and evil. Retributive justice is not something which God may or may not exercise, as is the case with mercy, love, and grace. Retributive justice, i.e., punishment for sin, is a matter of debt. It is something from which God cannot refrain doing lest he violate the rectitude and righteousness of his nature and will. Sin must be punished. It is a serious misunderstanding of Christianity and the nature of forgiveness to say that believers are those whose guilt is rescinded and whose sins are not punished. Our guilt and sin were fully imputed to our substitute, Jesus, who suffered the retributive justice in our stead.

An excellent illustration of this principle is found in Psalm 103:10. Retributive justice is that in God's nature which requires him to deal with us according to our sins and reward us according to our iniquities. But in Psalm 103:10 we are told that God "has NOT dealt with us according to our sins, NOR rewarded us according to our iniquities!" Indeed, according to v. 12, we are told that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

Does this mean, then, that God has simply ignored the righteous requirements of his nature, that he has dismissed or set aside the dictates of divine justice? Certainly not. See Romans 3:21-26. All sin is punished, either in the person of the sinner or in the person of his/her substitute. God's retributive justice was satisfied for us in the

person of Christ, who endured the full measure of punishment which the justice and righteousness of God required. Thus the reason we can confidently declare that God has not dealt with us according to our sins is because he has dealt with Jesus according to our sins. He will not reward us according to our iniquities because he has rewarded Jesus for them, by punishing him, for them, in our place.

10 Things You Should Know About God's Sovereignty

Few things are more controversial among Christians than the sovereignty of God. Is God truly sovereign over everything, including calamity, natural disasters, death, and demons, or is his sovereign control restricted to those things we typically regard as good, such as material blessing, family welfare, personal salvation, and good health? Today we turn our attention to ten things we should all know about God's sovereignty.

Before we begin, it's important to distinguish between natural evil, which would include such things as tornadoes, earthquakes, famine (although famine can often be the result of moral evil perpetrated by those who devastate a country through greed or theft), floods, and disease. Is God sovereign over natural evil? Does he exert absolute control over these events in nature, such that he could, if he willed to do so, prevent them from happening or redirect their course and minimize the extent of damage they incur? Yes.

Moral evil has reference to the decisions made by human beings. Does God have sovereignty over the will of man? Can he stir the

heart of an unbeliever to do his will? Can he frustrate the will of a person whose determination is to do evil and thereby prevent sin from happening? When a Christian does what is right, to whom should the credit and praise be given? And how is it possible for God to exert sovereignty over all of life without undermining the moral responsibility of men and women? These are the questions that find their answer in Scripture.

(1) Numerous biblical texts explicitly teach that God exerts complete sovereignty and meticulous control over all the so-called forces of "nature." I encourage you to take time to read Psalms 104; 147:8-9, 14-18; 148:1-12. Also consider Job 9:5-10; 26:7-14; 37:2-24; 38:8-41. Other texts include:

"It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom; and by his understanding stretched out the heavens. When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, and he brings forth the wind from his storehouses" (Jer. 10:12-13).

"Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Are you not he, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you, for you do all these things" (Jer. 14:22).

"I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither" (Amos 4:7).

"When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread . . ." (Psalm 105:16).

Jesus exercised this authority/sovereignty when he rebuked the storm on the Sea of Galilee, provoking this response from his disciples:

“And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. . . . And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:39-41).

Does this mean that God can put a halt to the destructive path of a tornado or redirect its trajectory, or that he can stop the waves of a tsunami? Yes.

(2) God is also sovereign over events that from our limited human point of view appear to be entirely random:

“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33).

(3) His sovereignty extends to the affairs of our daily lives and the plans we make for each day:

“A man’s steps are from the LORD; how then can man understand his way?” (Proverbs 20:24)

“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand” (Proverbs 19:21)

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. . . . Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

(4) God is sovereign over both life and death. Many are ready to concede that God is sovereign over the beginning of life but they do not like the idea that God is sovereign over the time and manner of its end. But note the following:

“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deuteronomy 32:39)

“The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 Samuel 2:6)

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’ – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (James 5:13-15).

David himself declared in no uncertain terms that every day of one’s life is written down in God’s book before any single day has yet to come to pass. In other words, the day of our birth and the day of our death have both been ordained by God:

“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

When David made Bathsheba pregnant, the Lord disciplined him by taking the child. 2 Samuel 12:15 says, “Then the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so that he was sick Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died.”

(5) God is even sovereign over the disabilities with which some are born.

Then the LORD said to [Moses], “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (Exodus 4:11)

(6) God is sovereign over everything, even the unjust death of his own Son.

“Jesus, [who was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23)

“For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” (Acts 4:27-28)

“Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief. . . . (Isaiah 53:10)

“[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will.” (Ephesians 1:11)

“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.” (Psalm 115:3)

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” (Job 42:2)

“All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35)

(7) God is also sovereign over the choices of human beings. If God does have sovereignty even over the choices of human beings, and they do evil things, is God morally culpable for their actions? No. This is the mystery of compatibilism, according to which both the sovereignty of God and the moral responsibility of human beings are perfectly compatible, neither canceling out the other. Several texts should be noted;

“Then God said to him [Abimelech] in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was

I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her” (Genesis 20:6).

Here we see that God exerts control over the decision-making of Abimelech and restrains him from having illicit sexual relations with Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Some argue that God cannot do that. They say he cannot intrude on the human will and prevent a free moral agent from committing abuse or an atrocity. Yet we see from this story that God can surely prevent someone from sinning against someone else if he so chooses.

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1).

Again, God’s sovereignty over the will/heart of the king is seen in his determination to turn that will or to direct the king’s choices in accordance with whatever God pleases. And yet the king (or any person) is still morally responsible to God for the decisions he/she makes.

“In the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing . . .” (Ezra 1:1).

Here we see a concrete example of what is asserted in Proverbs 21:1. God moved on (“stirred up”) the heart of the pagan king Cyrus to issue a decree that the Jews should be free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see also Ezra 6:22; 7:27). There are numerous other texts that describe how God exerted his will on and over the will of others so that his ultimate purpose might be achieved. See Deut. 2:30; Joshua 11:20; Judges 7:2-3,22; 1 Sam. 14:6,15,20; 2 Sam. 17:14; 1 Kings 12:15; 20:28-29; 2 Chron. 13:14-16; Acts 4:27-28; 2 Cor. 8:16-17; Rev. 17:17.

(8) God is sovereign over whether or not a woman becomes pregnant. For this, see Genesis 16:2; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:5; Judges 13:3.

(9) God is sovereign over the suffering of his people, as the cases of Job and Joseph make clear. James clearly says that God had a purpose in it all:

“You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose (*telos*) of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11).

But what about Satan’s hand in the suffering of Job? Did he not instigate the events that led to the death of Job’s family, the loss of his property, and the physical afflictions that he endured? Yes, but even Satan can do nothing apart from God’s sovereign permission. We read in Mark 1:27 that Jesus “commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” And Luke 4:36 says, “With authority and power he commands the unclean spirits and they come out.” No matter how powerful the enemy and his hordes may appear to be, they are always subordinate to the overruling will of a sovereign God.

When Joseph’s brothers cowered in fear of what might happen to them for having sold him into slavery, Joseph declared:

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20).

John Piper also sheds light on the experience of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers:

[Genesis 50:20] says, “You meant evil against me.” Evil is a feminine singular noun. Then it says, “God meant it for good.” The word “it” is a feminine singular suffix that can only agree with the antecedent feminine singular noun, “evil.” And the verb “meant” is the same past tense in both cases. You meant evil against me in the past, as you were doing it. And God meant that

very evil, not as evil, but as good in the past as you were doing it. And to make this perfectly clear, Psalm 105:17 says about Joseph's coming to Egypt, "[God] sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave." God sent him. God did not find him there owing to evil choices, and then try to make something good come of it. Therefore this text stands as a kind of paradigm for how to understand the evil will of man within the sovereign will of God."

(10) God is also sovereign over the animal kingdom, even when its inhabitants do destructive things. When the Assyrians populated Samaria with foreigners, 2 Kings 17:25 says, "Therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them." And who can forget the words of Daniel in the lions' den: "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths" (Dan. 6:22). John Piper explains:

"Other Scriptures speak of God commanding birds and bears and donkeys and large fish to do his bidding. Which means that all calamities that are owing to animal life are ultimately in the control of God. He can see a pit bull break loose from his chain and attack a child; and he could, with one word, command that its mouth be shut. Similarly he controls the invisible animal and plant life that wreaks havoc in the world: bacteria and viruses and parasites and thousands of microscopic beings that destroy health and life. If God can shut the mouth of a ravenous lion, then he can shut the mouth of a malaria-carrying mosquito and nullify every other animal that kills."

One final comment is in order. Although God's sovereignty is pervasive, that does not mean we will always be able to discern his purposes in the many events of life or why he has ordained things in his secret, decretive will that run contrary to what he has made known in his moral or perceptive will. If embracing this tension, this mystery, is offensive to you, I doubt that you will find much comfort in knowing that God is sovereign. But he is. Do I believe this because I can explain it? Do I believe it because it is to my mind no longer a

mystery? No. I believe it because this is what I see taught throughout Scripture.

10 Things You Should Know about God's Will(s)

There is a reason I said God's "Will(s)" (plural) instead of God's "will" (singular). My focus in this installment of 10 things you should know is the question of whether or not there are two senses in which God may be said to "will" something.

(1) The first thing we should remember is that in one sense God's "will" is irresistible and cannot be frustrated or ultimately overcome. We see this in texts such as these:

"I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose [or willing] of Yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

"All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

"But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3; cf. Eph. 1:11).

(2) We are also told that God "wills" that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and that all "come to repentance" (2 Pt. 3:9). How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements? The answer is found in a distinction between God's preceptive will and his decretive will.

Consider Exodus 4:21-23 and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God, through Moses, will command Pharaoh to let the people go. That is God's preceptive will, i.e., his will of precept or command. It is what God says *should* happen. Others refer to this as God's revealed will or his moral will. But God also says he will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will refuse to let the people go. That is God's decretive will, i.e., his will of decree or purpose. It is what God has ordained *shall* happen. It is also called his hidden will or sovereign will or efficient will. "Thus what we see [in Exodus] is that God commands that Pharaoh do a thing that God himself wills not to allow. The good thing that God commands he prevents. And the thing he brings about involves sin" (John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 114).

(3) God's decretive will refers to the secret, all-encompassing divine purpose according to which he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. His preceptive will refers to the commands and prohibitions in Scripture. One must reckon with the fact that *God may decree what he has forbidden*. That is to say, his decretive will may have ordained that event x shall occur, whereas Scripture, God's preceptive will, orders that event x should not occur. John Frame put it this way:

"God's will is sometimes thwarted because he wills it to be, because he has given one of his desires precedence over another" (No Other God, 113).

"God does not intend to bring about everything he values, but he never fails to bring about what he intends" (113).

(4) To put it as simply as possible: ***God is often pleased to ordain his own displeasure.***

(5) Perhaps the best example of the two senses in which God may be said to "will" something is found in Acts 2:22-23 and 4:27-28. Here we see that in some sense God "willed" the delivering up of his Son while in another sense "did not will" it because it was a sinful thing for his executioners to do. As Piper explains, "Herod's contempt for

Jesus (Luke 23:11), Pilate's spineless expediency (Luke 23:24), the Jews' 'Crucify! Crucify him!' (Luke 23:21), and the Gentile soldiers' mockery (Luke 23:36) were also sinful attitudes and deeds. Yet in Acts 4:27-28 Luke expresses his understanding of the sovereignty of God in these acts by recording the prayer of the Jerusalem saints: 'Truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do whatever thy hand and thy plan (boule) had predestined to take place.' Herod, Pilate, the soldiers, and Jewish crowds lifted their hand to rebel against the Most High only to find that their rebellion was unwitting (sinful) service in the inscrutable designs of God. . . . Therefore we know that it was not the 'will of God' that Judas and Pilate and Herod and the Gentile soldiers and the Jewish crowds disobey the moral law of God by sinning in delivering Jesus up to be crucified. But we also know that it was the will of God that this come to pass. Therefore we know that God in some sense wills what he does not will in another sense" (111-112).

(6) What God has eternally decreed shall occur may be the opposite of what he in Scripture says should or should not occur. It is important to keep in mind that ***our responsibility is to obey the revealed will of God and not to speculate on what is hidden.*** Only rarely, as in the case of predictive prophecy, does God reveal to us his decretive will. Examples of God's preceptive or revealed will include Ezek. 18:3; Matt. 6:10; 7:21; Eph. 5:17; and 1 Thess. 4:3. Some would also place in this category 1 Tim. 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. Examples of God's decretive or hidden will include James 4:15; 1 Cor. 4:19; Matt. 11:25-26.

(7) Another example of this principle is found in Revelation 17:16-17. Clearly, "waging war against the Lamb is sin and sin is contrary to the will of God. Nevertheless the angel says (literally), 'God gave into their [the ten kings] hearts to do his will, and to perform one will, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled' (v. 17). Therefore God willed (in one sense) to influence

the hearts of the ten kings so that they would do what is against his will (in another sense)” (Piper, 112).

(8) In Deut. 2:26-27 we read about Moses' request that the Israelites be allowed to pass through the land of Sihon king of Heshbon. It would have been a "good" thing had this king done so. Yet he didn't, because the Lord "hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate" (Deut. 2:30). Thus again we see that in one sense God “willed” that Sihon respond in a manner that was contrary to what God “willed” in another sense (namely, that Israel be blessed and not cursed).

Much the same is found in Joshua 11:19-20 where we are told that the Lord “hardened the hearts” of all those in Canaan to resist Israel so that he, the Lord, might destroy them just as he had said he would.

(9) Other cases are found in Romans 11:7-9, 31-32, and Mark 4:11-12. In the former text we see that “even though it is the command of God that his people see and hear and respond in faith (Isa. 42:18), nevertheless God also has his reasons for sending a spirit of stupor at times so that some will not obey his command” (Piper, 115). Similarly, “the point of Romans 11:31 . . . is that God's hardening of Israel is not an end in itself, but is part of a saving purpose that will embrace all the nations. But in the short run we have to say that he wills a condition (hardness of heart) that he commands people to strive against ('Do not harden your heart' [Heb. 3:8,15; 4:7])” (116). In the text from Mark, “God wills that a condition prevail that he regards as blameworthy. His will is that they turn and be forgiven (Mark 1:15), but he acts in a way to restrict the fulfillment of that will” (115).

In 1 Samuel 2:22-25 we read about the evil of Eli's sons, evil that was clearly against God's "will". God's revealed "will" was that they listen to their father's voice and cease from their sin. Yet we are told that the reason they didn't obey Eli (and God) was because "the Lord desired to put them to death." As Piper notes, "this makes sense only

if the Lord had the right and the power to restrain their disobedience – a right and power that he willed not to use. Thus we must say that in one sense God willed that the sons of Eli go on doing what he commanded them not to do; dishonoring their father and committing sexual immorality" (117).

Other examples similar to the one in 1 Samuel 2 are 2 Samuel 17:14; 1 Kings 12:9-15; Judges 14:4; and Deut. 29:2-4. These are all incidents, among many others that could be cited, where God chooses ("wills") for behavior to come about that he commands not ("does not will") to happen.

Still another example is found in Genesis 50:20. There Joseph says to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Says Wayne Grudem: "Here God's revealed will to Joseph's brothers was that they should love him and not steal from him or sell him into slavery or make plans to murder him. But God's secret will was that in the disobedience of Joseph's brothers a greater good would be done when Joseph, having been sold into slavery into Egypt, gained authority over the land and was able to save his family" (Systematic Theology, 215).

(10) Arminians have traditionally objected to this distinction between "two wills in God" when it comes to the issue of individual salvation. I am thinking in particular of the statements in 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. But Grudem responds by pointing out that

"ultimately Arminians also must say that God wills something more strongly than he wills the salvation of all people, for in fact all are not saved. Arminians claim that the reason why all are not saved is that God wills to preserve the free will of man more than he wills to save everyone. But is this not also making a distinction in two aspects of the will of God? On the one hand God wills that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:5-6; 2 Peter 3:9). But on the other hand he wills to preserve man's absolutely free choice. In

fact, he wills the second thing more than the first. But this means that Arminians also must say that 1 Timothy 2:5-6 and 2 Peter 3:9 do not say that God wills the salvation of everyone in an absolute or unqualified way -- they too must say that the verses only refer to one kind or one aspect of God's will" (684).

Both Calvinists and Arminians, therefore, must say that there is something else that God regards as more important than saving everyone: "Reformed theologians say that God deems his own glory more important than saving everyone, and that (according to Rom. 9) God's glory is also furthered by the fact that some are not saved. Arminian theologians also say that something else is more important to God than the salvation of all people, namely, the preservation of man's free will. So in a Reformed system God's highest value is his own glory, and in an Arminian system God's highest value is the free will of man" (Grudem, 684).

Are there Two Wills in God?

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of the "will" of God? Does God always "get his way"? Can his "will" be resisted or frustrated? Consider the following texts:

"I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose [or willing] of Yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

"All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'" (Dan. 4:35).

"But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3; cf. Eph. 1:11).

But we are also told that God "wills" that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and that all "come to repentance" (2 Pt. 3:9).

How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements? One answer is found in a distinction between God's **preceptive will** and his **decretive will**.

Consider Exodus 4:21-23 and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God, through Moses, will command Pharaoh to let the people go. That is God's *preceptive* will, i.e., his will of precept or command. It is what God says **should** happen. Others refer to this as God's *revealed* will or his *moral* will. But God also says he will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will refuse to let the people go. That is God's *decretive* will, i.e., his will of decree or purpose. It is what God has ordained **shall** happen. It is also called his *hidden* will or *sovereign* will or *efficient* will. "Thus what we see [in Exodus] is that God commands that Pharaoh do a thing that God himself wills not to allow. The good thing that God commands he prevents. And the thing he brings about involves sin" (John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" 114).

Thus, God's decretive will refers to the secret, all-encompassing divine purpose according to which he foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. His preceptive will refers to the commands and prohibitions in Scripture. **One must reckon with the fact that God may decree what he has forbidden.** That is to say, his decretive will may have ordained that event **x shall** occur, whereas Scripture, God's preceptive will, orders that event **x should not** occur.

John Frame put it this way:

"God's will is sometimes thwarted because he wills it to be, because he has given one of his desires precedence over another" (*No Other God*, 113).

"God does not intend to bring about everything he values, but he never fails to bring about what he intends" (113).

Or again: ***God is often pleased to ordain his own displeasure.***

(1) Perhaps the best example is found in Acts 2:22-23 and 4:27-28. Here we see that in some sense God "willed" the delivering up of his Son while in another sense "did not will" it because it was a sinful thing for his executioners to do. As Piper explains, "Herod's contempt for Jesus (Luke 23:11), Pilate's spineless expediency (Luke 23:24), the Jews' 'Crucify! Crucify him!' (Luke 23:21), and the Gentile soldiers' mockery (Luke 23:36) were also sinful attitudes and deeds. Yet in Acts 4:27-28 Luke expresses his understanding of the sovereignty of God in these acts by recording the prayer of the Jerusalem saints: 'Truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do whatever thy hand and thy plan (boule) had predestined to take place.' Herod, Pilate, the soldiers, and Jewish crowds lifted their hand to rebel against the Most High only to find that their rebellion was unwitting (sinful) service in the inscrutable designs of God. . . . Therefore we know that it was not the 'will of God' that Judas and Pilate and Herod and the Gentile soldiers and the Jewish crowds disobey the moral law of God by sinning in delivering Jesus up to be crucified. But we also know that it was the will of God that this come to pass. Therefore we know that God in some sense wills what he does not will in another sense" (111-112).

What God has eternally decreed shall occur may be the opposite of what he in Scripture says should or should not occur. It is important to keep in mind that our responsibility is to obey the revealed will of God and not to speculate on what is hidden. Only rarely, as in the case of predictive prophecy, does God reveal to us his decretive will. Examples of God's preceptive or revealed will include Ezek. 18:3; Matt. 6:10; 7:21; Eph. 5:17; and 1 Thess. 4:3. Some would also place in this category 1 Tim. 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. Examples of God's decretive or hidden will include James 4:15; 1 Cor. 4:19; Matt. 11:25-26.

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(3) In Deut. 2:26-27 we read about Moses' request that the Israelites be allowed to pass through the land of Sihon king of Heshbon. It would have been a "good" thing had this king done so. Yet he didn't, because the Lord "hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate" (Deut. 2:30). Thus "it was God's will (in one sense) that Sihon act in a way that was contrary to God's will (in another sense) that Israel be blessed and not cursed" (115).

(4) Much the same is found in Joshua 11:19-20 where we are told that the Lord "hardened the hearts" of all those in Canaan to resist Israel so that he, the Lord, might destroy them just as he had said he would.

(5) According to 1 Kings 22:19-23 (2 Chron. 18:18-22) Ahab was seeking to form an alliance with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, whereby they might together attack Ramoth Gilead which was under Aramean control. Jehoshaphat insisted that they first consult a prophet to get God's perspective. Ahab, on the other hand, gathered 400 of his prophets who told him to attack Ramoth Gilead and he would be victorious. Jehoshaphat consulted with the prophet Micaiah who told him of a vision he had had of a meeting of the heavenly council. In the vision, God asked who would go to entice Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead, in which battle Ahab would die. A "spirit" (angel?) volunteered to be a "deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his [Ahab's] prophets" (v. 22). God agreed. The spirit went forth, Ahab heeded the voice of the prophets, and went forth in the battle where he eventually died.

Some have argued that the "spirit" was in fact Satan, but there is no indication of this in the text. The spirit is portrayed as simply one among many others. There is no evidence he held some superior or special position. Was this a fallen spirit, a demon? Probably. It performs an evil function: it prompts Ahab's prophets to speak lies. Although the spirit is not Satan himself, there are undeniable parallels between this text and Job 1. Also, the passage seems to draw a distinction between the spirit that inspires Ahab's prophets and the one that inspires Micaiah (see v. 24). "The implication is that Micaiah and Ahab's prophets could not both have received their messages from the same source. There are, of course, two distinct sources, but it is Micaiah who has the right one. After all, it is his prophecy that comes to pass" (Page, 79).

Observe that even this demonic spirit is absolutely subject to the will of God. It does God's bidding. Micaiah is clear that it was God who "put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the Lord has proclaimed disaster against you" (v. 23). Thus God can and often does use demonic spirits to fulfill His purposes. Again we see that the question, "Who did it, God or the devil?" may be answered, "Yes." But God is always ultimate. [A close parallel with this passage is the account in Judges 9:23 where God sent an evil spirit to provoke discord between Abimelech and the people of Shechem.]

What is important for our purposes is the obvious fact that God commands his creatures not to lie or to deceive. Lying or deceiving is therefore contrary to God's will. All of God's creatures are morally obligated to tell the truth. Yet here we have an instance in which *God* "put a deceiving spirit in the mouth" of these men. In that sense, it would seem, the words they spoke were "according to God's will" at the same time that in another sense the words they spoke were "against God's will."

(6) Other cases are found in Romans 11:7-9,31-32, and Mark 4:11-12. In the former text we see that "even though it is the command of God

that his people see and hear and respond in faith (Isa. 42:18), nevertheless God also has his reasons for sending a spirit of stupor at times so that some will not obey his command" (115). Similarly, "the point of Romans 11:31 . . . is that God's hardening of Israel is not an end in itself, but is part of a saving purpose that will embrace all the nations. But in the short run we have to say that he wills a condition (hardness of heart) that he commands people to strive against ('Do not harden your heart' [Heb. 3:8,15; 4:7])" (116). In the text from Mark, "God wills that a condition prevail that he regards as blameworthy. His will is that they turn and be forgiven (Mark 1:15), but he acts in a way to restrict the fulfillment of that will" (115).

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(8) Other examples similar to the one in 1 Samuel 2 are 2 Samuel 17:14; 1 Kings 12:9-15; Judges 14:4; and Deut. 29:2-4. These are all incidents, among many others that could be cited, where God chooses ("wills") for behavior to come about that he commands not ("does not will") to happen.

(9) Still another example is found in Genesis 50:20. There Joseph says to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Says Grudem: "Here God's revealed will to Joseph's brothers was that they should love him and not steal from him or sell him into slavery or make plans to murder him. But God's secret will was that in the disobedience of Joseph's brothers a greater

good would be done when Joseph, having been sold into slavery into Egypt, gained authority over the land and was able to save his family" (Systematic Theology, 215).

Arminians have traditionally objected to this distinction between "two wills in God" when it comes to the issue of individual salvation. I am thinking in particular of the statements in 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. But "ultimately Arminians also must say that God wills something more strongly than he wills the salvation of all people, for in fact all are not saved. Arminians claim that the reason why all are not saved is that God wills to preserve the free will of man more than he wills to save everyone. But is this not also making a distinction in two aspects of the will of God? On the one hand God wills that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:5-6; 2 Peter 3:9). But on the other hand he wills to preserve man's absolutely free choice. In fact, he wills the second thing more than the first. But this means that Arminians also must say that 1 Timothy 2:5-6 and 2 Peter 3:9 do not say that God wills the salvation of everyone in an absolute or unqualified way -- they too must say that the verses only refer to one kind or one aspect of God's will" (684).

Both Calvinists and Arminians, therefore, must say that there is something else that God regards as more important than saving everyone: "Reformed theologians say that God deems *his own glory* more important than saving everyone, and that (according to Rom. 9) God's glory is also furthered by the fact that some are not saved. Arminian theologians also say that something else is more important to God than the salvation of all people, namely, the preservation of *man's free will*. So in a Reformed system God's highest value is his own glory, and in an Arminian system God's highest value is the free will of man" (684).

Addendum:

Observations by Edwards

It is worth taking note of Jonathan Edwards' explanation of this point:

"When a distinction is made between God's revealed will and his secret will, or his will of command and decree, will is certainly in that distinction taken in two senses. His will of decree, is not his will in the same sense as his will of command is. Therefore, it is no difficulty at all to suppose, that the one may be otherwise than the other: his will in both senses is his inclination. But when we say he wills virtue, or loves virtue, or the happiness of his creature; thereby is intended, that virtue, or the creature's happiness, absolutely and simply considered, is agreeable to the inclination of his nature. His will of decree is, his inclination to a thing, not as to that thing absolutely and simply, but with respect to the universality of things, that have been, are, or shall be. So God, though he hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though he hates sin in itself, yet he may will to permit it, for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things, and at all times. So, though he has no inclination to a creature's misery, considered absolutely, yet he may will it, for the greater promotion of happiness in this universality. God inclines to excellency, which is harmony, but yet he may incline to suffer that which is unharmonious in itself, for the promotion of universal harmony, or for the promoting of the harmony that there is in the universality, and making it shine the brighter" (*Misc.*, 527-28).

Again, he insists that

"There is no inconsistency or contrariety between the decretive and preceptive will of God. It is very consistent to suppose that God may hate the thing itself, and yet will that it should come to pass. Yea, I do not fear to assert that the thing itself may be contrary to God's will, and yet that it may be agreeable to his will that it should come to pass, because his will, in the one case, has not the same object with his will in the other case. To suppose God to have contrary wills towards the same object, is a contradiction; but it is not so, to

suppose him to have contrary wills about different objects. The thing itself, and that the thing should come to pass, are different, as is evident; because it is possible that the one may be good and the other may be evil. The thing itself may be evil, and yet it may be a good thing that it should come to pass. It may be a good thing that an evil thing should come to pass; and oftentimes it most certainly and undeniably is so, and proves so" (*Misc.*, 542-43).

Divine Decrees

There would seem to be little doubt that God's redemptive purpose antedates creation. Jesus declared that he came from heaven to accomplish the "will" of the Father (John 6:38). His sufferings were in accordance with the "predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23; cf. Acts 4:27-28; 1 Pt. 1:20). God's electing purpose antedates creation (Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pt. 1:1-2; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). See also Eph. 1:11. If, as Paul says, all things have been created not only "by" Jesus Christ but also "for" him (Col. 1:16), then creation in its totality exists as a means to the fulfillment of some specific purpose that terminates on and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Our salvation, says Paul, is in accordance with God's own "purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9).

The Order of the Divine Decrees

The point of the preceding is to indicate that God developed a plan in eternity past. The theological and logical interrelationship among the various elements in that plan is the focus of this study. The debate

historically has focused on the distinction between *supralapsarianism* and *infralapsarianism*:

- “Supralapsarian” is derived from two Latin words which, when combined, reflect the view that the decree of predestination (that is, the decree to elect and reprobate) precedes or is “above” (*supra*) the decree concerning the fall (*lapsus*).
- “Infralapsarianism” contends that the decree of predestination is subsequent to or “below” (*infra*) the decree concerning the fall.

All supralapsarian (hereafter *supra*) schemes share one point in common: the decree of election/reprobation is antecedent to that concerning the fall. Similarly, all infralapsarian (hereafter *infra*) schemes share a common theme: the decree of election/reprobation is subsequent to that concerning the fall. The question, therefore, “is whether sin is in the Divine thought antecedent to condemnation, the real ground of it, or only a providential means of executing the decree of reprobation formed irrespective of it” (James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], II:21).

Supralapsarian Calvinistic Theories

(A) *High Supralapsarianism*

1. the decree to elect and reprobate
2. the decree to create all humanity
3. the decree to ordain the fall
4. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for the elect
5. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS

(B) *Low Supralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity
2. the decree to elect and reprobate
3. the decree to ordain the fall
4. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for the elect
5. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS

(C) *Teleological Supralapsarianism*

1. the decree to elect and reprobate
2. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS
3. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for the elect
4. the decree to ordain the fall
5. the decree to create all humanity

This variation of supra was held by Gordon H. Clark, who argued that what is last in execution must be first in purpose or intention (*quod ultimum est in executione, debet esse primum in intentione*). See Clark's book, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Philadelphia: P & R Publishing Co., 1976), 49-60; and *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift* (Philadelphia: P & R. Publishing Co., 1968), 395-98, 478-84.

In other words, the last thing in history, which is the ultimate salvation of the elect and the condemnation of the non-elect, must be first in the order of decrees. That which is first in the order of history (creation) must be last in the order of intent.

Infralapsarian Calvinistic Theories

(A) *Hard Infralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity
2. the decree to ordain the fall
3. the decree to elect and reprobate
4. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for the elect
5. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS

(B) *Soft Infralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity
2. the decree to permit the fall
3. the decree to elect and reprobate
4. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for the elect
5. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS

The only difference between these two views is how they relate the will or decree of God to the fall of the race in Adam. “Soft” infras prefer to speak of God as having “permitted” the fall. The fall is not something that escapes the providential oversight of God, but the concern is to preserve God from being charged as the author of sin (*auctor peccati*).

(C) *Amyraldian Infralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity

2. the decree to permit the fall
3. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for all humanity
4. the decree to elect and reprobate
5. the decree to apply salvation to the elect through the HS

This view is also known as “hypothetical universalism” and is a reflection of the theology of Moise Amyraut (Moses Amyraldus), a 17th century reformed theologian. On this view, the redemptive sufferings of Christ are “unlimited” (Christ died for all people), thus making “hypothetically possible” the salvation of all people. But, since no one wills to embrace the work of Christ by faith, God decrees the undeserved salvation of some and the just condemnation of others. This is the view of “4-point Calvinism.”

Non-Calvinistic Theories

(A) *Arminian Infralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity
2. the decree to permit the fall
3. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for all people
4. the decree to provide prevenient grace to all people, enabling them to believe
5. the decree to elect those God “foreknows” will exercise faith in Christ and the decree to leave all others to the recompense of their sin

(B) *Universalistic Infralapsarianism*

1. the decree to create all humanity
2. the decree to permit the fall
3. the decree to elect all humanity to eternal life and salvation
4. the decree to provide salvation in Christ for all people
5. the decree to apply salvation to all people through the HS

Our primary concern is with the difference between Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism, specifically the way in which the objects of election and reprobation are conceived.

When God determined to glorify himself by the decree to save some and condemn others, were the respective objects of that decree conceived as creatable or created, unfallen or fallen? By placing the decree of election/reprobation *prior* to that of creation and the fall, supra affirms that its objects were, in the divine mind, only “potential” and thus morally neutral. Creation and the fall of man thus become the *means* by which the antecedent purpose of election and reprobation is realized. By placing the decree of election/reprobation *subsequent* to that of both creation and the fall, infra affirms that its objects were, in the divine mind, both “actual” and morally corrupt.

Following are a few criticisms of the supra scheme:

This first objection pertains only to “high” supralapsarianism: Nothing can be determined of a non-entity. How can God determine or decree the election and reprobation of what is at best “potential”? According to supra, God’s electing and reprobating activity terminates on no legitimate object. Simply put, of whom or what are election and reprobation predicated?

Second, election and reprobation presuppose not simply created entities but *fallen* and *ill-deserving* entities. Election is portrayed in Scripture as an act of mercy and compassion, in the same way that reprobation is portrayed as an act of justice. However, on the supra view, both election and reprobation are operations of mere sovereignty. Consider these statements:

“There can be no foreordination to death which does not contemplate its objects as already sinful” (Charles Hodge, II:318).

“That cannot be found which is not lost, and that cannot be saved which is in no danger” (James H. Thornwell, II:23).

Supra makes the decree “a purpose to save what in the light of the decree is not lost” (Thornwell, II:24).

“The very notion of revenging justice, simply considered, supposes a fault to be revenged” (Jonathan Edwards, Banner ed., II:540).

“If God had predestined man to glory before the fall, this would have been an act of outstanding goodness, but one which could not rightly be called mercy; for mercy is concerned not only with those who are not worthy, but with those who are unworthy, deserving its opposite. Likewise, if God had condemned man who was free from all sin, this would have been an act of absolute power, but not of justice. God mercifully frees, and justly condemns, as Augustine said” (Francis Turretin, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Beardslee, 368).

“The revelation of the *misericordia Dei* presupposes an already existent *miser*, and the revelation of the *iustitia Dei* presupposes an already existent *iniustitia*. And both these presuppose an existent creature to whom that two-fold revelation can apply, and also the creation of this creature” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II:2:130).

Third, creation is never in the Bible represented as a means of executing the purpose of election and reprobation. Nor is the fall

portrayed as a necessary instrument by which an antecedent salvific and condemnatory purpose is secured. As Barth put it,

“Obviously the sick man cannot be cured unless he exists as a man and is sick. But obviously, too, his existence as a man and his sickness cannot be regarded as means to cure him” (II:2:131).

Fourth, many have argued that *supra* is inconsistent with our intuitive understanding of divine mercy and justice. John Girardeau is representative of this objection:

“Now the fundamental laws of justice and benevolence, implanted by the divine hand in our moral constitution, rise up in revolt against the doctrine that God first determines to glorify his justice in the damnation of man, and then determines to create them and ‘efficaciously to procure’ their fall into sin in order to execute that purpose. The Supralapsarian logically makes God the efficient producer of sin” (*Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism*, 43).

Fifth, Herman Bavinck indicts *supra* insofar as

“it makes the eternal punishment of the reprobate an object of the divine will in the same manner and in the same sense as the eternal salvation of the elect; and that it makes sin, which leads to eternal destruction, a means in the same manner and in the same sense as the redemption in Christ is a means unto eternal salvation” (*The Doctrine of God*, 388).

Regeneration and the Sovereignty of God

The doctrine of man's total moral depravity, the bondage of the will, the teaching of Scripture on faith and repentance as God's gifts to his

elect, as well as the doctrine of grace, all suggest that regeneration is prior to and therefore the cause of faith. What follows is a brief discussion of two passages in the Gospel of John that have great relevance for this issue (see also Titus 3:5; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3,23-25; 1 John 5:1).

1. *John 1:11-13*

"He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

It is likely that here John is addressing unbelieving Jews who imagined that natural descent from Abraham was sufficient to guarantee admission into the family of God. Several observations are in order.

We must first determine the relationship between the divine begetting (v 13) and the human exercise of faith (v 12). Is receiving Christ (v 12) the prerequisite of the new birth (v 13), as if to say that the new birth is conditioned upon receiving Christ and believing on his name? Or is the begetting by God the root, cause, and presupposition of faith (as I have been arguing)? The latter would appear to be correct, and for several reasons.

- First of all, John 1:13 is parallel with John 3:6 ("that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"). The point of the latter text is that all human and earthly effort can do nothing but produce that which is human and earthly. It cannot generate spiritual life.

- Second, in John 6 coming to Christ (faith) is impossible for a man unless God draws him. In other words, John 6 denies to man any willingness to respond positively to the gospel apart from

effectual grace. Are we to believe that John 1 affirms what John 6 denies?

- Third, verse 13 says that God imparts life. The emphasis, as in John 3, is obviously on the divine source, origin, and cause of new life in Christ as over against any human or earthly or physical contribution.

- Fourth, to suggest that human faith precedes and causes divine begetting (i.e., the new birth) destroys the point of the analogy. The point of describing salvation in terms of "divine begetting" is to highlight the initiative of God in making alive or giving birth to that which was either dead or nonexistent. To suggest that man can *act* spiritually before he *exists* spiritually, that he can behave before he is born, is not only ridiculous but also undermines the force of the analogy between physical begetting and spiritual begetting.

- Fifth, even though the threefold negative in verse 13 refers primarily to physical begetting or aspects of the human reproductive process, it would seem extravagant for John to speak in this way if, after all, the human will does contribute to regeneration or in some way precedes and conditions the work of God.

What exactly then, does verse 13 mean? In general, the point of verse 13 is that birth into God's family is of a different order from birth into an earthly human family. One does not become a child of God by the same process or as a result of the same causal factors as one becomes a physical child of Abraham. Let us now look at each of the three negations.

First, one does not become a child of God by being "born of bloods." The plural form of the word blood may be explained in one of three ways:

1. the ancient belief that birth was the result of the action of blood, in this case, the blood of one's father and mother;

2. the blood of many distinguished ancestors;

3. drops of blood.

Whichever of these views (or perhaps another one) that you adopt, the point is that spiritual life is not genetically transmitted!

Second, spiritual birth is not "of the will of the flesh." This probably refers to sexual desire, although "flesh" in John does not mean sinful lust. "'The will of the flesh' is that desire that arises out of man's bodily constitution" (Morris, 101).

Third, spiritual birth is not caused by the "will of man." It may be that since the word for "man" here is the Greek word for a male rather than a female, the phrase refers to "the procreative urge of the male," thus making it a more specific expression of the previous (second) phrase. In ancient days the man was looked upon as the principal agent in generation, with the woman no more than a vessel for the embryo.

If these three phrases do not rule out all conceivable human causes in regeneration, the final phrase does. If regeneration is "of God," with no additional comment, then surely it cannot be of anything or anyone else.

2. *John 3:3-8*

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus answered, 'Truly truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know

where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

This passage has been the focus of discussion for several issues not directly related to our subject. I do not intend to address them nor to be sidetracked by questions concerning Christian baptism and the like (although I would like to say that a reference to Christian baptism is nowhere to be found in the text). I only wish to make a couple of brief but important observations.

We are told in verses 6-8 of the manner of regeneration. In verse 6 we are told that "each birth completely conditions the character of its product. The natural [i.e., the flesh] cannot produce anything but the natural, and by an invariable law does produce the natural. The supernatural [i.e., the Spirit] alone produces the supernatural, and it infallibly secures the supernatural character of its issue. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit, and it is *only* that which is born of the Spirit that is spirit" (John Murray, 2:185-86). Human nature is capable of propagating or producing only human nature. It is unable to produce anything that transcends its character as human. Simply put: like produces like. Or better yet: you can't get a spiritual effect from a physical cause.

The illustration our Lord employs in verse 8 is especially instructive. Like the wind, the work of the Holy Spirit is invisible and mysterious (you "do not know where it comes from and where it is going"). Like the wind, the work of the Holy Spirit is efficacious and sovereign (it "blows where it wishes") and cannot be pinned down by human contrivance. And like the wind, the work of the Holy Spirit reaps observable fruit ("you hear the sound of it"). John Murray summarizes the message of our Lord with these words:

"While the wind is invisible, irresistible and not subject in any way to our will, it does manifest its presence where it is: we hear its effects. So is it with the new birth. It manifests itself in the fruit of the Spirit—"that which is born of the Spirit is spirit". By a secret,

incomprehensible operation when, where, and how the Spirit pleases, he begets, or gives birth to, men, and this is a birth that becomes manifest in the fruits that are appropriate to its nature and purpose" (187-88).

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