

PART THREE

THE NATURE OF GOD

NINE

The Doctrine of God

Chapter Objectives

After completing your study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To outline the biblical basis for God's immanence and transcendence.
2. To identify at least five implications of the biblical view of immanence that affect our understanding and practice.
3. To identify six implications from the biblical view of transcendence that affect our belief and practice.
4. To distinguish between the attributes of God and the properties of the persons of the Trinity.
5. To differentiate the attributes of God from the acts of God.
6. To classify the attributes of God into his greatness and his moral qualities.

Chapter Summary

The Bible teaches that God is both immanent and transcendent. God is present and active within his creation, but superior to and inde-

pendent of anything that he has created. These biblical ideas must be kept in balance. The tendency to emphasize one or the other will lead to a faulty conception of God. Several methods have been employed to classify the attributes or qualities of God. We have chosen to follow the classification that differentiates between his greatness and goodness.

Study Questions

- What are some problems and distortions that evidence the need for a correct understanding of God?
- What difficulties arise when we overemphasize either immanence or transcendence?
- How do we confuse God's attributes with God's acts? Give some examples.
- What is the relationship between God's essence and his attributes?

Chapter Outline

The Immanence and Transcendence of God
Implications of Immanence
Implications of Transcendence
The Nature of Attributes
Classifications of Attributes

The doctrine of God is the central point for much of the rest of theology. One's view of God might even be thought of as supplying the whole framework within which one's theology is constructed and life is lived. It lends a particular coloration to one's style of ministry and philosophy of life.

Problems or difficulties on two levels make it evident that there is a need for a correct understanding of God. First is the popular or practical level. In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, J. B. Phillips has pointed out some common distorted understandings of God.¹ Some people think of God as a kind of celestial police officer who looks for opportunities to pounce upon erring and straying persons. A popular country song enunciates this view: "God's gonna get you for that; God's gonna get you for that. Ain't no use to run and hide, 'cuz he knows where you're at!" Insurance companies, with their references to "acts of God"—always catastrophic occurrences—seem to have a powerful, malevolent being in mind. The opposite view, that God is grandfatherly, is also prevalent. Here God is conceived of as an indulgent, kindly old gentleman who would never want to detract from humans' enjoyment of life. These and many other

false conceptions of God need to be corrected if our spiritual lives are to have any real meaning and depth.

Problems on a more sophisticated level also point out the need for a correct view of God. The biblical understanding of God has often been problematic. In the early church, the doctrine of the Trinity created special tension and debate. While that particular topic has not totally ceased to present difficulty, other issues have become prominent in our day. One of these concerns God's relationship to the creation. Is he so separate and removed from the creation (transcendent) that he does not work through it, and hence nothing can be known of him from it? Or is he to be found within human society and the processes of nature (immanent)? These and other issues call for clear thinking and careful enunciation of the understanding of God.

Many errors have been made in attempts to understand God, some of them opposite in nature. One is an excessive analysis, in which God is submitted to a virtual autopsy. The attributes of God are laid out and classified in a fashion similar to the approach taken in an anatomy textbook.² It is also possible to make

1. J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

2. E.g., Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 reprint).

the study of God an excessively speculative matter; and in that case the speculative conclusion itself, instead of a closer relationship with him, becomes the end. This should not be so. Rather, the study of God's nature should be seen as a means to a more accurate understanding of him and hence a closer personal relationship with him.

The Immanence and Transcendence of God

An important pair of emphases which we must make certain we preserve is the doctrines of God's immanence within his creation and his transcendence of it. Both truths are taught in Scripture. Jeremiah 23:24, for example, stresses God's presence everywhere within the universe, "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 (NIV). In this very context, however, both immanence and transcendence appear together: "Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away?" (v. 23). Paul told the philosophers on Mars' Hill in Athens, "He is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:27b-28 NIV).

On the other hand, in Isaiah 55:8-9 we read that God's thoughts and ways transcend ours: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." In Isaiah 6:1-5 God is depicted as seated on a throne, high and exalted, and seraphs call, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." Isaiah is very conscious of his own uncleanness and unworthiness. Yet here there is also witness to God's immanence, for the seraphs sing, "The whole earth is full of his glory" (v. 3).

The meaning of immanence is that God is present and active within his creation, and within the human race, even those members of it that do not believe in or obey him. His influence is everywhere. He is at work in and

through natural processes. The meaning of transcendence is that God is not merely a quality of nature or of humanity; he is not simply the highest human being. He is not limited to our ability to understand him. His holiness and goodness go far beyond, infinitely beyond ours, and this is true of his knowledge and power as well.

It is important to keep these two doctrines together, but it is not always easy to do so, for there are problems in knowing how to view them. The traditional way of thinking about God's transcendence has been spatial in nature: God is in heaven, high above the world. This is the picture found in the Bible, but we now realize that "up" and "down" do not really apply to a spirit, who is not located at some specific place within the universe. Further, with our understanding of the earth as a sphere, "up" and "down" are not meaningful terms. Are there other images which can be used to convey accurately the truth of God's transcendence and immanence?

I find helpful the concept of different levels or realms of reality. For example, several realities can coexist within the same space and yet be independent in such a way that they cannot be accessed from one another. Indeed, several different instances of the same general type of reality can nonetheless be separated from one another in certain ways. We are told by physicists that more than one universe might occupy the same space. An illustration here is the phenomenon of sound. There are many different sounds present (immanent) which we do not hear. The reason is that they occur at a frequency which the unaided human ear cannot pick up. If, however, we have a radio receiver, those sounds become audible. In a similar fashion, many visual images are present but unseen unless we have a television receiver. God is present and active within his creation, yet he is also transcendent to it, for he is a totally different type of being. He is divine.

We have noted the importance of maintaining both emphases. Immanence signifies that God does much of his work through natural means. He is not restricted to miracles. He even uses ordinary unbelieving humans such as

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Cyrus, whom he described as his "shepherd," his "anointed" (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). He uses technology and human skill and learning. Yet it is important to bear in mind the truth that God is transcendent. He is infinitely more than any natural or human event. If we emphasize immanence too much, we may identify everything that happens as God's will and working, as did the German Christians who in the 1930s regarded Adolf Hitler's policies as God's working in the world. We must bear in mind that there is a separation between God's holiness and much of what happens in the world. If we emphasize transcendence too much, however, we may expect God to work miracles at all times, while he may purpose instead to work through our effort. We may tend to mistreat the creation, forgetting that he himself is present and active there. We may depreciate the value of what non-Christians do, or their possession of some degree of sensitivity to the message of the gospel, forgetting that God is at work in and in touch with them.

Implications of Immanence

Divine immanence of the limited degree taught in Scripture carries several implications:

1. God is not limited to working directly to accomplish his purposes. While it is very obviously a work of God when his people pray and a miraculous healing occurs, it is also God's work when through the application of medical knowledge and skill a physician is successful in bringing a patient back to health. Medicine is part of God's general revelation, and the work of the doctor is a channel of God's activity.

2. God may use persons and organizations that are not avowedly Christian. In biblical times, God did not limit himself to working through the covenant nation of Israel or through the church. He even used Assyria, a pagan nation, to bring chastening upon Israel. He is able to use secular or nominally Christian organizations. Even non-Christians do some genuinely good and commendable things.

3. We should have an appreciation for all that God has created. The world is God's, and he is present and active within it. While it has been given to humankind to be used to satisfy

their legitimate needs, they ought not to exploit it for their own pleasure or out of greed. The doctrine of divine immanence therefore has ecological application. It also has implications regarding our attitudes to other people. God is genuinely present within everyone (although not in the special sense in which he indwells Christians). Therefore, no one is to be despised or treated disrespectfully.

4. We can learn something about God from his creation. All that is has been brought into being by God and, further, is actively indwelt by him. We may therefore detect clues about what God is like by observing the behavior of the created universe. For example, a definite

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pattern of logic seems to apply within the creation. There is an orderliness, a regularity, about it. Those who believe that God is sporadic, arbitrary, or whimsical by nature and that his actions are characterized by paradox and even contradiction either have not taken a close look at the behavior of the world or have assumed that God is in no sense operating there.

5. God's immanence means that there are points at which the gospel can make contact with the unbeliever. If God is to some extent present and active within the whole of the created world, he is present and active within humans who have not made a personal commitment of their lives to him. Thus, there are points at which they will be sensitive to the truth of the gospel message, places where they are already in touch with God's working. Evangelism aims to find those points and direct the message to them.

Implications of Transcendence

The doctrine of transcendence has several implications which will affect our other beliefs and practices.

1. There is something higher than human beings. Good, truth, and value are not deter-

mined by the shifting flux of this world and human opinion. There is something which gives value to humankind from above.

2. God can never be completely captured in human concepts. This means that all of our doctrinal ideas, helpful and basically correct though they may be, cannot fully exhaust God's nature. He is not limited to our understanding of him.

3. Our salvation is not our achievement. We are not able to raise ourselves to God's level by fulfilling his standards for us. Even if we were able to do so, it still would not be our accomplishment. The very fact that we know what he expects of us is a matter of his self-revelation, not our discovery. Even apart from the additional problem of sin, then, fellowship with God would be strictly a matter of his gift to us.

4. There will always be a difference between God and human beings. The gap between us is not merely a moral and spiritual disparity which originated with the fall. It is metaphysical, stemming from creation. Even when redeemed and glorified, we will still be his human creatures. We will never become God.

5. Reverence is appropriate in our relationship with God. Some worship, rightfully stressing the joy and confidence that the believer has in relationship to a loving heavenly Father, goes beyond that point to an excessive familiarity treating him as an equal, or worse yet, as a servant. If we have grasped the fact of the divine transcendence, however, this will not happen. While there are room and need for enthusiasm of expression, and perhaps even an exuberance, that should never lead to a loss of respect. Our prayers will also be characterized by reverence. Rather than making demands, we will pray as Jesus did, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

6. We will look for genuinely transcendent working by God. Thus we will not expect that only those things which can be accomplished by natural means will come to pass. While we will use every available technique of modern learning to accomplish God's ends, we will never cease to be dependent upon his working. We will not neglect prayer for his guidance or for his special intervention.

As with the matter of God's immanence, so also with transcendence we must guard against the dangers of excessive emphasis. We will not look for God merely in the religious or devotional; we will also look for him in the "secular" aspects of life. We will not look for miracles exclusively, but we will not disregard them either. Some of the divine attributes, such as holiness, eternity, and omnipotence, are expressive of the transcendent character of God. Others, such as omnipresence, are expressive of the immanent. If all these aspects of God's nature are given the emphasis and attention that the Bible assigns to them, a fully rounded understanding of God will be the result. While God is never fully within our grasp since he goes far beyond our ideas and forms, yet he is always available to us when we turn to him.

The Nature of Attributes

If we are to understand the relationship of God to the creation, it is important to understand his nature. When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature. Note that we are not referring here to the acts which he performs, such as creating, guiding, and preserving, nor to the corresponding roles he plays—Creator, Guide, Preserver.

The attributes are qualities of the entire Godhead. They should not be confused with *properties*, which, technically speaking, are the distinctive characteristics of the various persons of the Trinity. Properties are functions (general), activities (more specific), or acts (most specific) of the individual members of the Godhead.

The attributes are permanent qualities. They cannot be gained or lost. They are intrinsic. Thus, holiness is not an attribute (a permanent, inseparable characteristic) of Adam, but it is of God. God's attributes are essential and inherent dimensions of his very nature. While our understanding of God is undoubtedly filtered through our own mental framework, his attributes are not our conceptions projected upon

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him. They are objective characteristics of his nature.

The attributes are inseparable from the being or essence of God. Some earlier theologies thought of the attributes as somehow adhering to or being at least in some way distinguishable from the underlying substance or being or essence.³ In many cases, this idea was based upon the Aristotelian conception of substance and attribute. Some other theologies have gone to the opposite extreme, virtually denying that God has an essence. Here the attributes are pictured as a sort of collection of qualities. They are thought of as fragmentary parts or segments of God.⁴ It is better to conceive of the attributes of God as his nature, not as a collection of fragmentary parts nor as something in addition to his essence. Thus, God is his love, holiness, and power. These are but different ways of viewing the unified being, God. God is richly complex, and these conceptions are merely attempts to grasp different objective aspects or facets of his being.

When we speak of the incomprehensibility of God, then, we do not mean that there is an unknown being or essence beyond or behind his attributes. Rather, we mean that we do not

know his qualities or his nature completely and exhaustively. We know God only as he has revealed himself. While his self-revelation is doubtless consistent with his full nature and accurate, it is not an exhaustive revelation. Further, we do not totally understand or know comprehensively that which he has revealed to us of himself. Thus there is, and always will be, an element of mystery regarding God.

Classifications of Attributes

In attempts to better understand God, various systems of classifying his attributes have been devised. With some modifications, the classification adopted for this study is that of natural and moral attributes. The moral attributes are those which in the human context would relate to the concept of rightness (as opposed to wrongness). Holiness, love, mercy, and faithfulness are examples. Natural attributes are the nonmoral superlatives of God, such as his knowledge and power.⁵ Instead of attributes of *greatness* and attributes of *goodness*. We turn first, in the following chapter, to the qualities of greatness, which include spirituality, life, personality, infinity, and constancy.

3. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, p. 158.

4. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes of God*.

5. Edgar Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1927), p. 222.

The Greatness of God

Chapter Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To list the attributes of God's greatness—spirituality, personality, life, infinity, and constancy—and to express the essence of each.
2. To explain the ways in which God is infinite.
3. To foster confidence in the almighty God.

Chapter Summary

Certain attributes of God express his greatness. We will concentrate in this chapter on God as being personal, all-powerful, eternal, spirit, present everywhere within his creation, and unchanging in his perfection.

Study Questions

- Name and describe each of the attributes of God's greatness.
- Why is God's infinity in terms of space a tension between God's immanence and transcendence?
- Explain the qualifications of the all-powerful character of God. Why are they significant?
- What does it mean when we say God is free?

Chapter Outline

Spirituality
Life
Personality
Infinity
 Space
 Time
 Knowledge
 Power
Constancy

Spirituality

Among the most basic of God's attributes of greatness is the fact that he is spirit; that is, he is not composed of matter and does not possess a physical nature. This is most clearly stated by Jesus in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." It is also implied in various references to his invisibility (John 1:18; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15-16).

One consequence of God's spirituality is that he does not have the limitations involved with a physical body. For one thing, he is not limited to a particular geographical or spatial location. This is implicit in Jesus' statement, "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" (John 4:21). Consider also Paul's statement in Acts 17:24: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man." Furthermore, he is not destructible, as is material nature.

There are, of course, numerous passages which suggest that God has physical features such as hands or feet. How are we to regard these references? It seems most helpful to treat them as anthropomorphisms, attempts to ex-

press the truth about God through human analogies. There also are cases where God appeared in physical form, particularly in the Old Testament. These should be understood as theophanies, or temporary manifestations of God. It seems best to take the clear statements about the spirituality and invisibility of God at face value and interpret the anthropomorphisms and theophanies in the light of them. Indeed, Jesus himself clearly indicated that a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39).

In biblical times, the doctrine of God's spirituality was a counter to the practice of idolatry and of nature worship. God, being spirit, could not be represented by any physical object or likeness. That he is not restricted by geographical location also countered the idea that God could be contained and controlled. In our day, the Mormons maintain that not only God the Son, but also the Father has a physical body, although the Holy Spirit does not. Indeed, Mormonism contends that an immaterial body cannot exist.¹ This is clearly contradicted by the Bible's teaching on the spirituality of God.

1. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, 36th ed. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), p. 48.

Life

Another attribute of greatness is the fact that God is alive. He is characterized by life. This is affirmed in Scripture in several different ways. It is found in the assertion that he *is*. His very name "I AM" (Exod. 3:14) indicates that he is a living God. It is also significant that Scripture does not argue for his existence. It simply affirms it or, more often, merely assumes it. Hebrews 11:6 says that everyone who "would draw near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Thus, existence is considered a most basic aspect of his nature.

This characteristic of God is prominent in the contrast frequently drawn between him and other gods. He is depicted as the living God, as contrasted with inanimate objects of metal or stone. Jeremiah 10:10 refers to him as the true God, the living God, who controls nature. "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth," on the other hand, "shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens" (v. 11). First Thessalonians 1:9 draws a similar contrast between the idols from which the Thessalonians had turned and the "living and true God."

Not only does this God have life, but he has a kind of life different from that of every other living being. While all other beings have their life in God, he does not derive his life from any external source. He is never depicted as having been brought into being. John 5:26 says that he has life in himself. The adjective *eternal* is applied to him frequently, implying that there never was a time when he did not exist. Further, we are told that "in the beginning," before anything else came to be, God was already in existence (Gen. 1:1). Thus, he could not have derived his existence from anything else.

Moreover, the continuation of God's existence does not depend upon anything outside of himself. All other beings, insofar as they are alive, need something—nourishment, warmth, protection—to sustain that life. With God, however, there is no indication of such a need. On the contrary, Paul denies that God needs anything or is served by human hands (Acts 17:25).

While God is independent in the sense of not needing anything else for his existence, this is not to say that he is aloof, indifferent, or unconcerned. God relates to us, but it is by his choice that he thus relates, not because he is compelled by some need. He has acted and continues to act out of *agapē*, unselfish love, rather than out of need.

Sometimes the life of God is described as self-caused. It is preferable to refer to him as the uncaused one. His very nature is to exist. It is not necessary for him to will his own existence. For God not to exist would be logically contradictory.

A proper understanding of this aspect of God's nature should free us from the idea that God needs us. God has chosen to use us to accomplish his purposes, and in that sense he now needs us. He could, however, if he so chose, have bypassed us. It is to our gain that he permits us to know and serve him, and it is our loss if we reject that opportunity.

Personality

In addition to being spiritual and alive, God is personal. He is an individual being, with self-consciousness and will, capable of feeling, choosing, and having a reciprocal relationship with other personal and social beings.

That God has personality is indicated in several ways in Scripture. One is the fact that God has a name. He has a name which he assigns to himself and by which he reveals himself. In biblical times names were not mere labels to distinguish one person from another. In our impersonal society, this may seem to be the case. Names are seldom chosen for their meaning; rather, parents choose a name because they happen to like it, or it is currently popular. The Hebrew approach was quite different, however. A name was chosen very carefully, and with attention to its significance.² When Moses wonders how he should respond when the Israelites will ask the name of the God who has sent him, God identifies himself as "I AM" or "I WILL BE"

2. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 40–45.

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(Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord—Exod. 3:14). By this he demonstrates that he is not an abstract, unknowable being, or a nameless force. Nor is this name used merely to refer to God or to describe him. It is also used to address him. Genesis 4:26 indicates that humans began to call upon the name of the Lord. Psalm 20 speaks of boasting in the name of the Lord (v. 7) and calling upon him (v. 9). The name is to be spoken and treated respectfully, according to Exodus 20:7. The great respect accorded to the name is indicative of the personality of God.

A further indication of the personal nature of God is the activity in which he engages. He is depicted in the Bible as knowing and communing with human persons. In the earliest picture of his relationship with them (Gen. 3), God comes to and talks with Adam and Eve; the impression is given that this had been a regular practice. Although this representation of God is undoubtedly anthropomorphic, it nonetheless teaches that he is a person who related to persons as such. He is depicted as having all of the capacities associated with personality: he knows, he feels, he wills, he acts.

There are a number of resulting implications. Because God is a person, the relationship we have with him has a dimension of warmth and understanding. God is not a machine or a computer that automatically supplies the needs of people. He is a knowing, loving, good Father.

Further, our relationship with God is not merely a one-way street. God is, to be sure, an

God is unlimited and unlimitable in terms of space, time, knowledge, and power.

object of respect and reverence. But he does not simply receive and accept what we offer. He is a living, reciprocating being. He is not merely one of whom we hear, but one whom we meet and know. Accordingly, God is to be treated as a being, not an object or force. He is not something to be used or manipulated.

God is an end in himself, not a means to an end. He is of value to us for who he is in himself, not merely for what he *does*. The rationale

for the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3), is given in the preceding verse: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." We misread the passage if we interpret it as meaning that the Israelites were to put God first because of what he had done—that out of gratitude they were to make him their only God. Rather, what he had done was the proof of what he is; it is because of what he is that he is to be loved and served, not only supremely but exclusively. God as a person is to be loved for who he is, not for what he can do for us.

Infinity

God is infinite. This means not only that God is unlimited, but that he is unlimitable. In this respect, God is unlike anything we experience. Even those things that common sense once told us are infinite or boundless are now seen to have limits. Energy at an earlier time seemed inexhaustible. We have in recent years become aware that the types of energy with which we are particularly familiar have rather sharp limitations, and we are approaching those limits considerably more rapidly than we imagined. The infinity of God, however, speaks of a limitless being.

Space

The infinity of God may be thought of from several angles. We think first in terms of space. Here we have what has traditionally been referred to as immensity and omnipresence. God is not subject to limitations of space. By this we do not mean merely the limitation of being in a particular place—if an object is in one place it cannot be in another. Rather, it is improper to think of God as present in space at all. All finite objects have a location. They are somewhere. This necessarily prevents their being somewhere else. With God, however, the question of whereness or location is not applicable. God is the one who brought space (and time) into being. He was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. Consider here Paul's statement that God does not dwell in manmade shrines, because he is the Lord of

heaven and earth; he made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24–25).

Another aspect of God's infinity in terms of space is that there is no place where he cannot be found. We are here facing the tension between the immanence of God (he is everywhere) and the transcendence (he is not anywhere). The point here is that nowhere within the creation is God inaccessible. Jeremiah quotes God as saying, "Am I a God at hand, . . . and not a God afar off?" (Jer. 23:23). The implication seems to be that being a God at hand does not preclude his being afar off as well. He fills the whole heaven and earth (v. 24). Thus, we cannot hide "in secret places" so that we cannot be seen. The psalmist found that he could not flee from the presence of God—wherever the psalmist went, God would be there (Ps. 139:7–12). Jesus himself carried this concept a step further. In giving the Great Commission, he commanded his disciples to go as witnesses everywhere, even to the end of the earth, and he would be with them to the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). Thus, he in effect indicated that he is not limited either by space or by time.

Time

That God is not limited by time means that time does not apply to him. He was before time began. The question, How old is God? is simply inappropriate. He is no older now than a year ago, for infinity plus one is no more than infinity.

God is the one who always is. He was, he is, he will be. Psalm 90:1–2 says, "LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." Jude 25 says, "To the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever." A similar thought is found in Ephesians 3:21. The use of expressions such as "the first and the last" and the "Alpha and Omega" serve to convey the same idea (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

The fact that God is not bound by time does not mean that he is not conscious of the succession of points of time. He is aware that events occur in a particular order. Yet he is equally aware of all points of that order simultaneously. This transcendence over time has been likened to a person who sits on a tall building while he watches a parade. He sees all parts of the parade at the different points on the route rather than only what is going past him at the moment. He is aware of what is passing each point of the route. So God also is aware of what is happening, has happened, and will happen at each point in time. Yet at any given point within time he is also conscious of the distinction between what is now occurring, what has been, and what will be.³

Knowledge

The infinity of God may also be considered with respect to objects of knowledge. His understanding is immeasurable (Ps. 147:5). Jesus said that not a sparrow can fall to the ground without the Father's will (Matt. 10:29), and that even the hairs of the disciples' heads are all numbered (v. 30). We are all completely transparent before God (Heb. 4:13). He sees and knows us totally. And he knows all genuine possibilities, even when they seem limitless in number.

A further factor, in the light of this knowledge, is the wisdom of God. By this is meant that when God acts, he takes all of the facts and correct values into consideration. Knowing all things, God knows what is good. In Romans 11:33 Paul eloquently assesses God's knowledge and wisdom: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" The psalmist describes God's works as having all been made in wisdom (Ps. 104:24).

God has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to re-

3. See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1962), especially his criticism of Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

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wise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have. One can therefore pray confidently, knowing that God will not grant something that is not good.

Power

Finally, God's infinity may also be considered in relationship to what is traditionally referred to as the omnipotence of God. By this we mean that God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power. This is taught in Scripture in several ways. There is evidence of God's unlimited power in one of his names, *'el Shaddai*. When God appeared to Abraham to reaffirm his covenant, he identified himself by saying, "I am God Almighty" (Gen. 17:1). We also see God's omnipotence in his overcoming apparently insurmountable problems. The promise in Jeremiah 32:15 that fields will once again be bought and sold in Judah seems incredible in view of the impending fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Jeremiah's faith, however, is strong: "Ah Lord God! . . . Nothing is too hard for thee" (v. 17). And after speaking of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus responds to his disciples' question as to who can then be saved: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

This power of God is manifested in several different ways. References to the power of God over nature are common, especially in the Psalms, often with an accompanying statement about God's having created the whole universe. God's power is also evident in his control of the course of history. Paul spoke of God's "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation" for all peoples (Acts 17:26). Perhaps most amazing in many ways is God's power in human life and personality. The real measure of divine power is not the ability of God to create or to lift a large rock. In many ways, changing human personality, turning sinners to salvation, is far more difficult.

There are, however, certain qualifications of this all-powerful character of God. He cannot

arbitrarily do anything whatsoever that we may conceive of. He can do only those things which are proper objects of his power. Thus, he cannot do the logically absurd or contradictory. He cannot make square circles or triangles with four corners. He cannot undo what happened in the past, although he may wipe out its effects or even the memory of it. He cannot act contrary to his nature—he cannot be cruel or unconcerned. He cannot fail to do what he has promised. In reference to God's having made a promise and having confirmed it with an oath, the writer to the Hebrews says: "So that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we . . . might have strong encouragement" (Heb. 6:18). All of these "inabilities," however, are not weaknesses, but strengths. The inability to do evil or to lie or to fail is a mark of positive strength rather than of failure.

Another aspect of the power of God is that he is free. While God is bound to keep his promises, he was not initially under any compulsion to make those promises. On the contrary, it is common to attribute his decisions and actions to the "good pleasure of his will." God's decisions and actions are not determined by consideration of any factors outside himself. They are simply a matter of his own free choice.

Constancy

In several places in Scripture, God is described as unchanging. In Psalm 102, the psalmist contrasts God's nature with the heavens and the earth: "They will perish, but thou dost endure; . . . they pass away; but thou art the same, and thy years have no end" (vv. 26–27). God himself says that although his people have turned aside from his statutes, "I the LORD do not change" (Mal. 3:6). James says that with God "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).

This divine constancy involves several aspects. There is first no quantitative change. God cannot increase in anything, because he is already perfection. Nor can he decrease, for if he were to, he would cease to be God. There also is no qualitative change. The nature of God does

not undergo modification. Therefore, God does not change his mind, plans, or actions, for these rest upon his nature, which remains unchanged no matter what occurs. Indeed, in Numbers 23:19 the argument is that since God is not human, his actions must be unalterable. Further, God's intentions as well as his plans are always consistent, simply because his will does not change. Thus, God is ever faithful to his promises, for example, his covenant with Abraham.

What, then, are we to make of those passages where God seems to change his mind, or to repent over what he has done? These passages can be explained in several ways:

1. Some of them are to be understood as anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. They are simply descriptions of God's actions and feelings in human terms, and from a human perspective. Included here are representations of God as experiencing pain or regret.
2. What may seem to be changes of mind may actually be new stages in the working out of God's plan. An example of this is the offering of salvation to the Gentiles. Although a part of God's original plan, it represented a rather sharp break with what had preceded.
3. Some apparent changes of mind are changes of orientation that result when humans move into a different relationship with God. God did not change when Adam sinned; rather, humankind had moved into God's disfavor. This works the other way as well. Take the case of Nineveh. God said, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed, *unless they repent.*" Nineveh repented and

was spared. It was humans who had changed, not God's plan.

Some interpretations of the doctrine of divine constancy, expressed as immutability, have actually drawn heavily upon the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive. But the biblical view is not that God is static but stable. He is active and dynamic, but in a way which is stable and consistent with his nature. What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfil his commitments. The believer can rely upon that (Lam. 3:22-23; 1 John 1:9).

God is a great God. The realization of this fact stirred biblical writers such as the psalmists. And this realization stirs believers today, causing them to join with the songwriter in proclaiming:

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!"
(Stuart K. Hine, 1953)

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The Goodness of God

Chapter Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To recall and describe each of the attributes of God that make up his moral purity, integrity, and love.
2. To understand the relationship between the moral qualities of God and the harmony that exists among these qualities.
3. To accurately assess the relationship between God's love and justice and to show how both attributes are in harmony with each other.
4. To foster understanding that will lead to increased trust, love, and commitment toward a benevolent and loving God.

Chapter Summary

The goodness of God may be discovered in all of his relationships with his creatures. It is most effectively demonstrated in his moral attributes of purity and integrity, and in the entire complex of characteristics that are identified as his love. Sometimes these attributes are viewed as conflicting with each other, as in the case of justice and love. When correctly viewed, however, this is not the case.

Study Questions

- What are the moral attributes of God, and why are they necessary to an adequate understanding of his true nature?
- What is the importance of the holiness of God, and why is it so difficult for humans to understand this aspect of God's nature?
- How does our understanding of Jesus help us especially to understand the love of God?
- Some have contended that there is tension between God's justice and his love. How would you respond to such a charge?

Chapter Outline

Moral Qualities

Moral Purity

Holiness

Righteousness

Justice

Integrity

Genuineness

Veracity

Faithfulness

Love

Benevolence

Grace

Mercy

Persistence

God's Love and Justice—A Point of Tension?

Moral Qualities

If the qualities of greatness we described in the preceding chapter were God's only attributes, he might conceivably be an immoral or amoral being, exercising his power and knowledge in a capricious or even cruel fashion. But what we are dealing with is a good God, one who can be trusted and loved. He has attributes of goodness as well as greatness. In this chapter we will consider his moral qualities, that is, the characteristics of God as a moral being. For convenient study, we will classify his basic moral attributes as purity, integrity, and love.

Moral Purity

By moral purity we are referring to God's absolute freedom from anything wicked or evil. His moral purity includes the dimensions of (1) holiness, (2) righteousness, and (3) justice.

1. Holiness

There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. The first is his uniqueness. He is totally separate from all of creation. This is what Louis Berkhof called the "majesty-holiness" of God.¹ The uniqueness of God is affirmed in Exodus 15:11:

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 73.

"Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The foundations of the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke. The seraphs cried out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:1-4). The Hebrew word for "holy" (*qādōsh*) means "marked off" or "withdrawn from common, ordinary use." The verb from which it is derived suggests "to cut off" or "to separate." Whereas in the religions of the peoples around Israel the adjective *holy* was freely applied to objects, actions, and personnel involved in the worship, in Israel's covenant the people themselves are also to be holy. God not only is personally free from any moral wickedness or evil. He is unable to tolerate the presence of evil. He is, as it were, allergic to sin and evil. Isaiah, upon seeing God, became very much aware of his own impurity. He despaired, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5). Similarly, Peter, on the occasion of the miraculous catch of fish, realizing who and what Jesus was, said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). When one measures one's holiness, not against the standard of oneself

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or of other humans, but against God, the need for a complete change of moral and spiritual condition becomes apparent.

2. Righteousness

The second dimension of God's moral purity is his righteousness. This is, as it were, the holiness of God applied to his relationships to other beings. The righteousness of God means, first of all, that the law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is. Psalm 19:7–9 puts it this way: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD

Because God has attributes of goodness as well as greatness, he can be trusted and loved.

is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether." In other words, God commands only what is right, and what will therefore have a positive effect upon the believer who obeys.

The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law which he himself has established. Thus, God in his actions is described as doing right. For example, Abraham says to Jehovah, "Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25). Because God is righteous, measuring up to the standard of his law, we can trust him. He is honest in his dealings.

A question which has been a topic of debate down through the history of Christian thought is, What makes certain actions right and others wrong? In medieval times one school of thought, the realists, maintained that God chooses the right because it is right.² What he

2. E.g., Anselm *Cur Deus homo?* 1.12.

calls good could not have been designated otherwise, for there is an intrinsic good in kindness and an inherent evil in cruelty. Another school of thought, the nominalists, asserted that it is God's choice which makes an action right. God does not choose an action because of some intrinsic value in it.³ Rather, it is his sovereign choice of that action which makes it right. He could have chosen otherwise; if he had done so, the good would be quite different from what it is. Actually, the biblical position falls between realism and nominalism. The right is not something arbitrary, so that cruelty and murder would have been good if God had so declared. In making decisions, God does follow an objective standard of right and wrong, a standard which is part of the very structure of reality. But that standard to which God adheres is not external to God—it is his own nature. He decides in accordance with reality, and that reality is himself.

3. Justice

We have noted that God himself acts in conformity with his law. He also administers his kingdom in accordance with his law. That is, he requires that others conform to it. The righteousness described in the preceding section is God's personal or individual righteousness. His justice is his official righteousness, his requirement that other moral agents adhere to the standards as well. God is, in other words, like a judge who as a private individual adheres to the law of society, and in his official capacity administers that same law, applying it to others.

The Scripture makes clear that sin has definite consequences. These consequences must eventually come to pass, whether sooner or later. In Genesis 2:17 we read God's warning to Adam and Eve: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Similar warnings recur throughout the Scripture, including Paul's statement that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). God will eventually punish sin, for sin intrinsically deserves to be punished.

3. William of Ockham, *Reportatio*, book 3, questions 13C, 12CCC.

The justice of God means that he is fair in the administration of his law. He does not show favoritism or partiality. Who we are is not significant. What we have done or not done is the only consideration in the assigning of consequences or rewards. Evidence of God's fairness is that he condemned those judges in biblical times who, while charged to serve as his representatives, accepted bribes to alter their judgments (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:3; Amos 5:12). The reason for their condemnation was that God himself, being just, expected the same sort of behavior from those who were to administer his law.

As was the case regarding holiness, God expects his followers to emulate his righteousness and justice. We are to adopt as our standard his law and precepts. We are to treat others fairly and justly (Amos 5:15, 24; James 2:9) because that is what God himself does.

Integrity

The cluster of attributes which we are here classifying as integrity relates to the matter of truth. There are three dimensions of truthfulness: (1) genuineness—being true; (2) veracity—telling the truth; and (3) faithfulness—proving true. Although we think of truthfulness primarily as telling the truth, genuineness is the most basic dimension of truthfulness. The other two derive from it.

1. Genuineness

The basic dimension of the divine integrity is God's genuineness. In contrast to the many false or spurious gods that Israel encountered, their Lord is the true God. In Jeremiah 10, the prophet describes with considerable satire the objects which some people worship. They construct idols with their own hands, and then proceed to worship them, although these products of their own making are unable to speak or walk (v. 5). Of the Lord, however, it is said, "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King" (v. 10). In John 17:3, Jesus addresses the Father as the only true God. There are similar references in 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 John 5:20; and Revelation 3:7 and 6:10.

God is real; he is not fabricated or constructed or imitation, as are all the other claimants to deity. God is what he appears to be. This is a large part of his truthfulness. The vice-president for public affairs at a Christian college used to say, "Public relations is nine-tenths being what you say you are, and one-tenth modestly saying it." God does not simply seem to embody the qualities of greatness and goodness which we are examining. He actually is those attributes.

2. Veracity

Veracity is the second dimension of God's truthfulness. God represents things as they really are. Samuel said to Saul, "The Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent" (1 Sam. 15:29). Paul speaks of the God "who never lies" (Titus 1:2). And in Hebrews 6:18 we read that when God added his oath to his promise, there were "two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false." We should note that these passages are affirming more than that God does not and will not lie. God *cannot* lie. Lying is contrary to his very nature.

God has appealed to his people to be honest in all situations. They are to be truthful both in what they formally assert and in what they imply. Thus, for example, the Israelites were to have only one set of weights in their bag. While there were some people who had two sets of weights, one of which they used when they

God is true, he tells the truth,
and he proves true.

were making purchases and the other when they were selling, God's people were to use the same set for both types of dealings (Deut. 25:13-15). God's people are to be thoroughly honest in the presentation of the gospel message as well. While some might rationalize that the significance of the end justifies use of the means of misrepresentation, Paul makes clear that "we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or

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to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). A God of truth is best served by presentation of the truth.

3. Faithfulness

If God's genuineness is a matter of his being true and veracity is his telling of the truth, then his faithfulness means that he proves true. God keeps all his promises. He never has to revise his word or renege on a promise. As Balaam said to Balak, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?" (Num. 23:19). Paul is more concise: "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thess. 5:24). Similar descriptions of God as faithful are to be found in 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:18–22; 2 Timothy 2:13; and 1 Peter 4:19.

The faithfulness of God is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the pages of Scripture. God proved himself to be a God who always fulfils what he has said he will do. His promise to Abraham of a son came when Abraham and Sarah were seventy-five and sixty-five years of age respectively. Sarah was already past the age of childbearing and had proved to be barren. Yet God showed himself faithful—the son whom he had promised (Isaac) was born.

As is the case with his other moral attributes, the Lord expects believers to emulate his truthfulness. God's people are not to give their word thoughtlessly. And when they do give their word, they are to remain faithful to it (Eccles. 5:4–5). They must keep not only the promises made to God (Pss. 61:5, 8; 66:13) but those made to their fellow humans as well (Josh. 9:16–21).

Love

When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. There is some scriptural basis for this. For example, in 1 John 4:8 and 16 we read: "He who does not

love does not know God; for God is love. . . . So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." In general, God's love may be thought of as his eternal giving or sharing of himself. As such, love has always been present among the members of the Trinity. Jesus said, "But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). The trinity of God means that there has been an eternal exercise of God's love, even before there were any created beings. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are: (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.

1. Benevolence

Benevolence is a basic dimension of God's love. By this we mean the concern of God for the welfare of those whom he loves. He unselfishly seeks our ultimate welfare. Of numerous biblical references, John 3:16 is probably the best known. Statements of God's benevolence are not restricted to the New Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 7:7–8 we read, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand."

God's love is an unselfish interest in us for our sake. It is *agapē*, not *erōs*. In John 15 Jesus draws a contrast between a master-servant (or employer-employee) relationship and a friend-to-friend relationship. It is the latter type of relationship which is to characterize the believer and the Savior. He is concerned with our good for our own sake, not for what he can get out of us. God does not need us. He is all-powerful, all-sufficient. He can accomplish what he wishes without us, although he has chosen to work through us.

This self-giving, unselfish quality of the divine love is seen in what God has done. God's love in sending his Son to die for us was not motivated by our prior love for him. The apostle John says, "In this is love, not that we loved

God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). The whole of Romans 5:6–10 elaborates upon the same theme. Note especially verse 8 ("But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us") and verse 10 ("while we were enemies we were reconciled to God"). This divine love not only took the initiative in creating the basis of salvation by sending Jesus Christ, but it also continuously seeks us out. The three parables of Jesus in Luke 15 emphasize this strongly.

God's benevolence, the actual caring and providing for those he loves, is seen in numerous ways. God even cares for and provides for the subhuman creation. Jesus taught that the Father feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:26, 28; see also Ps. 145:16). The principle that God is benevolent in his provision and protection is extended to his human children as well (Matt. 6:25, 30–33). While we may tend to take these promises somewhat exclusively to ourselves as believers, the Bible indicates that God is benevolent to the whole human race. In the sense of benevolence, God's love is extended to all humankind. He "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). So we see that God inherently not only feels in a particular positive way toward the objects of his love, but he acts for their welfare. Love is an active matter.

2. Grace

Grace is another attribute which is part of the manifold of God's love. By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity. This grace is to be distinguished from the benevolence (unselfishness) that we just described. Benevolence is simply the idea that God does not seek his own good, but rather that of others. It would be possible for God to love unselfishly, with a concern for others, but still to insist that this love be deserved, thus requiring each person to do something or offer something that would earn the

favours received or to be received. Grace, however, means that God supplies us with undeserved favours. He requires nothing from us.

The graciousness of God is, of course, prominent in the New Testament. Some have suggested that the Old Testament picture of God is quite different, however. Yet numerous passages in the Old Testament speak of the graciousness of God. In Exodus 34:6, for example, God says of himself: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." In the New Testament there are passages which explicitly relate salvation to the extravagant gift of God's grace. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 2:8–9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (cf. Titus 2:11; 3:4–7). Salvation is indeed the gift of God. Sometimes the justice of God is impugned on the grounds that some receive this grace of God and others do not. That any are saved at all is, however, the amazing thing. If God gave to all what they deserve, none would be saved. Everyone would be lost and condemned.

3. Mercy

God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy sees them as miserable and needy. The psalmist said, "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Similar ideas are found in Deuteronomy 5:10; Psalm 57:10; and Psalm 86:5. The attribute of mercy is seen in the compassion which Jesus felt when people suffering from physical ailments came to him (Mark 1:41). Their spiritual condition also moved him (Matt. 9:36). Sometimes both kinds of needs are involved. Thus, in describing the same incident, Matthew speaks of Jesus' having compassion and healing the sick (Matt. 14:14), while Mark speaks of his having compassion and teaching many things (Mark 6:34). Matthew elsewhere combines the two ideas. When Jesus saw the crowds were helpless like sheep without a

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shepherd, he had compassion on them. So he went about "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 9:35-36).

4. Persistence

A final dimension of the love of God is persistence. We read of God's persistence in Psalm 86:15; Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; and 2 Peter 3:15. In all of these verses God is pictured as withholding judgment and continuing to offer salvation and grace over long periods of time.

God's long-suffering was particularly apparent with Israel; this was, of course, an outflow of his faithfulness to them. The people of Israel repeatedly rebelled against Jehovah, desiring to return to Egypt, rejecting Moses' leadership, setting up idols for worship, falling into the practices of the people about them, and intermarrying with them. There must have been times when the Lord was inclined to abandon his people. A large-scale destruction of Israel on the fashion of the flood would have been most appropriate, yet the Lord did not cut them off.

But God's patience was not limited to his dealings with Israel. Peter even suggests (1 Peter 3:20) that the flood was delayed as long as it was in order to provide opportunity of salvation to those who ultimately were destroyed. In speaking of the future day of great destruction, Peter also suggests that the second coming is delayed because of God's forbearance. He does not wish "that any should perish, but that all reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

On one occasion Peter came to Jesus (on behalf of the disciples, no doubt) and asked how often he should forgive a brother who sinned against him: as many as seven times? Jesus' reply to Peter, which has been interpreted as either "77 times" or "490 times," indicates the persistent, relentless nature of the love that is to be characteristic of a follower of the Lord. Jesus himself demonstrated such persistent love with Peter. Though Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus forgave him, just as he had with so many of his other shortcomings. As a matter of fact, the angel at the tomb instructed the three

women to go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus was going to Galilee where they would see him (Mark 16:7). God's faithfulness and forbearance were also manifested in his not casting off other believers who had sinned and failed him: Moses, David, Solomon, and many more.

God's Love and Justice— A Point of Tension?

We have looked at many characteristics of God, without exhausting them by any means. But what of the interrelationships among them? Presumably, God is a unified, integrated being whose personality is a harmonious whole. There should be, then, no tension among any of these attributes. But is this really so?

The one point of potential tension usually singled out is the relationship between the love of God and his justice. On one hand, God's justice seems so severe, requiring the death of those who sin. This is a fierce, harsh God. On the other hand, God is merciful, gracious, forgiving, long-suffering. Are not these two sets of traits in conflict with one another? Is there, then, internal tension in God's nature?⁴

If we begin with the assumptions that God is an integrated being and the divine attributes are harmonious, we will define the attributes in the light of one another. Thus, justice is loving justice and love is just love. The idea that they conflict may have resulted from defining these attributes in isolation from one another. While the conception of love apart from justice, for example, may be derived from outside sources, it is not a biblical teaching. What we are saying is that love is not fully understood unless we see it as including justice. If love does not include justice, it is mere sentimentality.

Actually, love and justice have worked together in God's dealing with humanity. God's justice requires that there be payment of the penalty for sin. God's love, however, desires that we be restored to fellowship with him. The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the justice and the love of

4. Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 227-28.

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God have been maintained. And there really is no tension between the two. There is tension only if one's view of love requires that God forgive sin without any payment being made. But that is to think of God as different from what he really is. Moreover, the offer of Christ as atonement shows a greater love on God's part than would simply indulgently releasing people from the consequences of sin.

To fulfil his just administration of the law, God's love was so great that he gave his Son for us. Love and justice are not two separate attributes competing with one another. God is both righteous and loving, and has himself given what he demands.⁵

5. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, pp. 377–78.

God's Three-in-Oneness: The Trinity

Chapter Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To understand and explain the biblical teaching on the Trinity in three aspects: the oneness of God, the deity of three, and three-in-oneness.
2. To list and explain the historical constructions of the Trinity, such as the "economic" view, dynamic monarchianism, modalistic monarchianism, and the orthodox view.
3. To describe the essential elements of the doctrine of the Trinity and explain why they are so vital to the Christian faith.
4. To articulate the various analogies used in describing or clarifying the doctrine of the Trinity.

Chapter Summary

The Bible does not explicitly teach the trinitarian view of God, but the teachings that God is one and that three persons are God clearly imply this view. Numerous attempts have been made to understand this doctrine, some of which have led to distortions of this profound truth. While we may never fully comprehend

this difficult doctrine, there are analogies that can help us to understand it more fully.

Study Questions

- Explain the biblical evidence for the deity of three.
- In which book of the Bible do we find the strongest evidence of a coequal Trinity? Explain why this is so.
- How may the various historical views of the Trinity be disputed?
- What are the essential elements of the doctrine of the Trinity? How do they help our understanding and deepen our faith?
- What do analogies contribute to our understanding?

Chapter Outline

The Biblical Teaching
 The Oneness of God
 The Deity of Three
 Three-in-Oneness
 Historical Constructions
 The "Economic" View of the Trinity
 Dynamic Monarchianism
 Modalistic Monarchianism
 The Orthodox Formulation
 Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity
 The Search for Analogies

In the doctrine of the Trinity, we encounter one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity. Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God. In so doing, it presents what seems on the surface to be a self-contradictory doctrine. Furthermore, this doctrine is not overtly or explicitly stated in Scripture. Nevertheless, devout minds have been led to it as they sought to do justice to the witness of Scripture.

The doctrine of the Trinity is crucial for Christianity. It is concerned with who God is, what he is like, how he works, and how he is to be approached. Moreover, the question of the deity of Jesus Christ, which has historically been a point of great tension, is very much wrapped up with one's understanding of the Trinity. The position we take on the Trinity will have profound bearing on our Christology.

The position we take on the Trinity will also answer several questions of a practical nature. Whom are we to worship—Father only, Son, Holy Spirit, or the Triune God? To whom are we to pray? Is the work of each to be considered in isolation from the work of the others, or may we think of the atoning death of Jesus as somehow the work of the Father as well? Should the Son be thought of as the Father's equal in es-

sence, or should he be relegated to a somewhat lesser status?

We will begin our study of the Trinity by examining the biblical basis of the doctrine. It will be important to note the type of witness in the Scripture which led the church to formulate and propound this strange doctrine. Then we will examine various early attempts to deal with the biblical data, including the orthodox formulation. Finally, we will note the essential elements of the doctrine and search for analogies that may help us to understand it somewhat better.

The Biblical Teaching

We begin with the biblical data bearing upon the doctrine of the Trinity. There are three separate but interrelated types of evidence: evidence for the unity of God—that God is one; evidence that there are three persons who are God; and finally, indications or at least intimations of the three-in-oneness.

The Oneness of God

The religion of the ancient Hebrews was a rigorously monotheistic faith, as indeed the Jewish religion is to this day. The unity of God was revealed to Israel at several different times

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and in various ways. The Ten Commandments, for example, begin with the statement, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me [or besides me]" (Exod. 20:2–3).

The prohibition of idolatry, the second commandment (v. 4), also rests upon the uniqueness of Jehovah. He will not tolerate any worship of objects made by human hands, for he alone is God. The rejection of polytheism runs throughout the Old Testament. God repeatedly demonstrates his superiority to other claimants to deity.

A clearer indication of the oneness of God is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, the great truths of which the people of Israel were commanded to absorb themselves and to inculcate into their children. They were to meditate upon these teachings ("these words . . . shall be upon your heart," v. 6). They were to talk about them—at home and on the road, when lying down and when arising (v. 7). They were to use visual aids to call attention to them—wearing them

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on their hands and foreheads, and writing them on the doorframes of their houses and on their gates. And what are these great truths that were to be emphasized so? One is an indicative, a declarative statement: "The LORD our God is one LORD" (v. 4). The second great truth God wanted Israel to learn and teach is a command based on his uniqueness: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (v. 5). Because he is one, there was to be no division of Israel's commitment.

The teaching regarding the oneness of God is not restricted to the Old Testament. James 2:19 commends belief in one God, while noting its insufficiency for justification. Paul writes as he discusses the eating of meat which had been offered to idols: "We know that an idol is nothing

at all in the world, and that there is . . . but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:4, 6 NIV). Here Paul, like the Mosaic law, excludes idolatry on the grounds that there is only one God.

The Deity of Three

All this evidence, if taken by itself, would no doubt lead us to a basically monotheistic belief. What, then, moved the church beyond this evidence? It was the additional biblical witness to the effect that three persons are God. The deity of the first, the Father, is scarcely in dispute. In addition to the references in 1 Corinthians 8:4, 6, and 1 Timothy 2:5–6, we may note the cases where Jesus refers to the Father as God. In Matthew 6:26, for example, he indicates that "your heavenly Father feeds [the birds of the air]." In a parallel statement which follows shortly thereafter, he indicates that "God . . . clothes the grass of the field" (v. 30). It is apparent that, for Jesus, "God" and "your heavenly Father" are interchangeable expressions. And in numerous other references to God, Jesus obviously has the Father in mind (e.g., Matt. 19:23–26; 27:46; Mark 12:17, 24–27).

Somewhat more problematic is the status of Jesus as deity, yet Scripture also identifies him as God. A key reference to the deity of Christ Jesus is found in Philippians 2. In verses 5–11 Paul has taken what was in all likelihood a hymn of the early church and used it as the basis of an appeal to his readers to practice humility. He notes that "though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v. 6). The word here translated "form" is *morphē*. This term in classical Greek as well as in biblical Greek means "the set of characteristics which constitutes a thing what it is." Denoting the genuine nature of a thing, *morphē* contrasts with *schēma* which is also generally translated "form," but in the sense of shape or superficial appearance rather than substance. The use of *morphē* in this passage, which reflects the faith of the early

church, suggests a deep commitment to the full deity of Christ.

Another significant passage is Hebrews 1. The author, whose identity is unknown to us, is writing to a group of Hebrew Christians. He (or she) makes several statements which strongly imply the full deity of the Son. In the opening verses the writer argues that the Son is superior to the angels, and notes that God has spoken through the Son, appointed him heir of all things, and made the universe through him (v. 2). The author then describes the Son as the "radiance of God's glory" (niv) and the "exact representation of his being." While it could perhaps be maintained that this affirms only that God revealed himself through the Son, rather than that the Son is God, the context suggests otherwise. In addition to identifying himself as the Father of the one whom he here calls Son (v. 5), God is quoted in verse 8 (from Ps. 45:6) as addressing the Son as "God" and in verse 10 as "Lord" (from Ps. 102:25). The writer concludes by noting that God said to the Son, "Sit at my right hand" (from Ps. 110:1). It is significant that the Scripture writer addresses Hebrew Christians, who certainly would be steeped in monotheism, in ways which undeniably affirm the deity of Jesus and his equality with the Father.

A final consideration is Jesus' own self-consciousness. We should note that Jesus never directly asserted his deity. He never said simply, "I am God." Yet several threads of evidence suggest that this is indeed how he understood himself. He claimed to possess what properly belongs only to God. He spoke of the angels of God (Luke 12:8-9; 15:10) as his angels (Matt. 13:41). He regarded the kingdom of God (Matt. 12:28; 19:14, 24; 21:31, 43) and the elect of God (Mark 13:20) as his own. Further, he claimed to forgive sins (Mark 2:8-10). The Jews recognized that only God can forgive sins, and they consequently accused Jesus of blasphemy. He also claimed the power to judge the world (Matt. 25:31) and to reign over it (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62).

There also are biblical references which identify the Holy Spirit as God. Here we may note that there are passages where references to the Holy Spirit occur interchangeably with references to

God. One example of this is Acts 5:3-4. Ananias and Sapphira held back a portion of the proceeds from the sale of their property, misrepresenting what they laid at the apostles' feet as the entirety. Here, lying to the Holy Spirit (v. 3) is equated with lying to God (v. 4). The Holy Spirit is also described as having the qualities and performing the works of God. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). He regenerates or gives new life (John 3:8). In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, we read that it is the Spirit who conveys gifts to the church, and who exercises sovereignty over who receives those gifts. In addition, he receives the honor and glory reserved for God.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul reminds believers that they are God's temple and that his Spirit dwells within them. In chapter 6, he says that their bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit within them (vv. 19-20). "God" and "Holy Spirit" seem to be interchangeable expressions. Also there are several places where the Holy Spirit is put on an equal footing with God. One is the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19; a second is the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14; finally, there is 1 Peter 1:2, where Peter addresses his readers as "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood."

Three-in-Oneness

On the surface, these two lines of evidence—God's oneness and threeness—seem contradictory. As the church began to reflect upon doctrinal issues, it concluded that God must be understood as three-in-one or, in other words, triune. At this point we must pose the question whether this doctrine is explicitly taught in the Bible, is suggested by the Scripture, or is merely an inference drawn from other teachings of the Bible.

One text which has traditionally been appealed to as documenting the Trinity is 1 John 5:7, that is, as it is found in earlier versions such as the King James: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." Here is, apparently, a clear and succinct statement of

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the three-in-oneness. Unfortunately, however, the textual basis is so weak that some recent translations (e.g., *NIV*) include this statement only in an italicized footnote, and others omit it altogether (e.g., *RSV*). If there is a biblical basis for the Trinity, it must be sought elsewhere.

The plural form of the noun for the God of Israel, *ʾĕlōhîm*, is sometimes regarded as an intimation of a trinitarian view. This is a generic name used to refer to other gods as well. When used with reference to Israel's God, it is generally, but not always, found in the plural. Some would argue that here is a hint of the plural nature of God.

There are other plural forms as well. In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image." Here the plural appears both in the verb "let us make" and in the possessive suffix "our." When Isaiah was called, he heard the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8). What is significant, from the standpoint of logical analysis, is the *shift* from singular to plural. Genesis 1:26 actually says, "Then God said [singular], 'Let us make [plural] man in our [plural] image.'" God is quoted as using a plural verb with reference to himself. Similarly Isaiah 6:8 reads: "Whom shall I send [singular], and who will go for us [plural]?"

The teaching regarding the image of God in humankind has also been viewed as an intimation of the Trinity. Genesis 1:27 reads:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Some would argue that what we have here is a parallelism not merely in the first two, but in all three lines. Thus, "male and female he created them" is equivalent to "So God created man in his own image" and to "in the image of God he created him." On this basis, the image of God in man (generic) is to be found in the fact that man has been created male and female (i.e., plural).¹ This means that the image

1. Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 33–40, 43–48; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), vol. 3, part 1, pp. 183–201.

of God must consist in a unity in plurality, a characteristic of both the ectype and the archetype. According to Genesis 2:24, man and woman are to become one (*'echād*); a union of two separate entities is entailed. It is significant that the same word is used of God in the *Shema*: "The LORD our God is one [*'echād*] LORD" (Deut. 6:4). It seems that something is being affirmed here about the nature of God—he is an organism, that is, a unity of distinct parts.

In several places in Scripture the three persons are linked together in unity and apparent equality. One of these is the baptismal formula as prescribed in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20): baptizing in (or into) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Note that "name" is singular although there are three persons included. Yet another direct linking of the three names is the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14—"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Here again is a linkage of the three names in unity and apparent equality.

It is in the Fourth Gospel that the strongest evidence of a coequal Trinity is to be found. The threefold formula appears again and again: 1:33–34; 14:16, 26; 16:13–15; 20:21–22 (cf. 1 John 4:2, 13–14). The interdynamics among the three persons comes through repeatedly, as George Hendry has observed.² The Son is sent by the Father (14:24) and comes forth from him (16:28). The Spirit is given by the Father (14:16), sent from the Father (14:26), and proceeds from the Father (15:26). Yet the Son is closely involved in the coming of the Spirit: he prays for his coming (14:16); the Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name (14:26); the Son will send the Spirit from the Father (15:26); the Son must go away so that he can send the Spirit (16:7). The Spirit's ministry is understood as a continuation and elaboration of that of the Son. He will bring to remembrance what the Son has said (14:26); he will bear witness to the Son

2. George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 31.

(15:26); he will declare what he hears from the Son, thus glorifying the Son (16:13–14).

The prologue of the Gospel also contains material rich in significance for the doctrine of the Trinity. John says in the first verse of the book: "The Word was with God, and the Word was God." Here is an indication of the divinity of the Word. Here also we find the idea that while the Son is distinct from the Father, yet there is fellowship between them, for the preposition *pros* ("with") does not connote merely physical proximity to the Father, but an intimacy of fellowship as well.

There are other ways in which this Gospel stresses the closeness and unity between the Father and the Son. Jesus says, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), and "he who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). He prays that his disciples may be one as he and the Father are one (17:21).

Our conclusion from the data we have just examined: Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not expressly asserted, the Scripture, particularly the New Testament, contains so many suggestions of the deity and unity of the three persons that we can understand why the church formulated the doctrine, and conclude that they were right in so doing.

Historical Constructions

During the first two centuries A.D. there was little conscious attempt to wrestle with the theological and philosophical issues of what we now term the doctrine of the Trinity. Such thinkers as Justin and Tatian stressed the unity of essence between the Word and the Father and used the imagery of the impossibility of separating light from its source, the sun. In this way they illustrated that, while the Word and the Father are distinct, they are not divisible or separable.³

The "Economic" View of the Trinity

In Hippolytus and Tertullian, we find the development of an "economic" view of the Trinity. There was little attempt to explore the eternal

relations among the three; rather, there was a concentration on the ways in which the Triad were manifested in creation and redemption. While creation and redemption showed the Son and the Spirit to be other than the Father, they were also regarded as inseparably one with him in his eternal being. Like the mental functions of a human being, God's reason, that is, the Word, was regarded as being immanently and indivisibly with him.

By way of a quick evaluation, we note that there is something of a vagueness about this view of the Trinity. Any effort to come up with a more exact understanding of just what it means will prove disappointing.

Dynamic Monarchianism

In the late second and third centuries, two attempts were made to come up with a precise definition of the relationship between Christ and God. Both of these views have been referred to as monarchianism (literally, "sole sovereignty"), since they stress the uniqueness and unity of God, but only the latter claimed the designation for itself.

Dynamic monarchianism maintained that God was dynamically present in the life of the man Jesus. There was a working or force of God upon or in or through the man Jesus, but there was no real presence of God within him. The originator of dynamic monarchianism, Theodotus, asserted that prior to baptism Jesus was an ordinary, though completely virtuous man. At the baptism, the Spirit, or Christ, descended upon him, and from that time on he performed miraculous works of God. These ideas of dynamic monarchianism never became widespread.⁴

Modalistic Monarchianism

By contrast, modalistic monarchianism was a fairly widespread, popular teaching. Whereas dynamic monarchianism seemed to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, modalism appeared to affirm it. Both varieties of monarchianism de-

3. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 61.2; 128.3–4

4. Athanasius *On the Decrees of the Nicene Synod (Defense of the Nicene Council)* 5.24; *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 2.26; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 7.30.

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sired to preserve the doctrine of the unity of God. Modalism, however, was also strongly committed to the full deity of Jesus. Since the term *Father* was generally regarded as signifying the Godhead itself, any suggestion that the Word or Son was somehow other than the Father upset the modalists. It seemed to them to be a case of bitheism, belief in two gods.

The essential idea of this school of thought is that there is one Godhead which may be variously designated as Father, Son, or Spirit. The terms do not stand for real distinctions, but are merely names which are appropriate and applicable at different times. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical—they are successive revelations of the same person. The modalistic solution to the paradox of threeness and oneness was, then, not three persons, but one person with three different names, roles, or activities.⁵

It must be acknowledged that in modalistic monarchianism we have a genuinely unique, original, and creative conception, and one which is in some ways a brilliant breakthrough. Both the unity of the Godhead and the deity of all three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are preserved. Yet the church in assessing this theology deemed it lacking in some significant respects. In particular, the fact that the three occasionally appear simultaneously upon the stage of biblical revelation proved to be a major stumbling block to this view. The baptismal scene, where the Father speaks to the Son, and the Spirit descends upon the Son, is an example. Some of the trinitarian texts noted earlier also proved troublesome.

The Orthodox Formulation

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was enunciated in a series of debates and councils which were in large part prompted by the controversies sparked by such movements as monarchianism and Arianism. It was at the Council of Constantinople (381) that there emerged a definitive statement in which the church made explicit the beliefs which had been held implicitly. The view which prevailed was basically that of Athanasius (293–373), as

it was elaborated and refined by the Cappadocian theologians—Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.

The formula which expresses the position of Constantinople is “one *ousia* [substance] in three *hypostases* [persons].” The emphasis often seems to be more on the latter part of the formula, that is, on the separate existence of the three persons rather than on the one indivisible Godhead. The one Godhead exists simultaneously in three modes of being or hypostases. The Godhead exists “undivided in divided persons.” There is an “identity of nature” in the three hypostases.

The Cappadocians attempted to expound the concepts of common substance and multiple separate persons by the analogy of a universal and its particulars—the individual persons of the Trinity are related to the divine substance in the same fashion as individual humans are related to the universal human (or humanity). Each of the individual hypostases is the *ousia* of the Godhead distinguished by the characteristics or properties peculiar to him, just as individual humans have unique characteristics which distinguish them from other individual human persons. These respective properties of the divine persons are, according to Basil, paternity, sonship, and sanctifying power or sanctification.⁶

It is clear that the orthodox formula protects the doctrine of the Trinity against the danger of modalism. Has it done so, however, at the expense of falling into the opposite error—tritheism? On the surface, the danger seems considerable. Two points were made, however, to safeguard the doctrine of the Trinity against tritheism.

First, it was noted that if we can find a single activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which is in no way different in any of the three persons, we must conclude that there is but one identical substance involved. And such unity was found in the divine activity of revelation. Revelation originates in the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Spirit.

5. Athanasius *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 3.23.4.

6. Basil *Letters* 38.5; 214.4; 236.6.

It is not three actions, but one action in which all three are involved.

Second, there was an insistence upon the concreteness and indivisibility of the divine substance. Much of the criticism of the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity focused on the analogy of a universal manifesting itself in particulars. To avoid the conclusion that there is a multiplicity of Gods within the Godhead just as there is a multiplicity of humans within humanity, Gregory of Nyssa suggested that, strictly speaking, we ought not to talk about a multiplicity of humans, but a multiplicity of the one universal human. Thus the Cappadocians continued to emphasize that, while the three members of the Trinity can be distinguished numerically as persons, they are indistinguishable in their essence or substance. They are distinguishable as persons, but one and inseparable in their being.

It should be reiterated here that *ousia* is not abstract, but a concrete reality. Further, this divine essence is simple and indivisible. Following the Aristotelian doctrine that only what is material is quantitatively divisible, the Cappadocians at times virtually denied that the category of number can be applied to the Godhead at all. God is simple and incomposite. Thus, while each of the persons is one, they cannot be added together to make three entities.

Essential Elements of a Doctrine of the Trinity

It is important to pause here to note the salient elements which must be included in any doctrine of the Trinity.

1. We begin with the unity of God. God is one, not several. The unity of God may be compared to the unity of husband and wife, but we must keep in mind that we are dealing with one God, not a joining of separate entities.

2. The deity of each of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, must be affirmed. Each is qualitatively the same. The Son is divine in the same way and to the same extent as is the Father, and this is true of the Holy Spirit as well.

3. The threeness and the oneness of God are not in the same respect. Although the orthodox

interpretation of the Trinity seems contradictory (God is one and yet three), the contradiction is not real, but only apparent. A contradiction exists if something is A and not A at the same time and in the same respect. Modalism attempted to deal with the apparent contradiction by stating that the three modes or manifestations of God are not simultaneous; at any given time, only one is being revealed. Ortho-

We will someday understand God better than we do now, yet even then we will not totally comprehend him.

doxy, however, insists that God is three persons at every moment of time. Maintaining his unity as well, orthodoxy deals with the problem by suggesting that the way in which God is three is in some respect different from the way in which he is one. The fourth-century thinkers spoke of one *ousia* and three hypostases. Now comes the problem of determining what these two terms mean, or more broadly, what the difference is between the nature of God's oneness and that of his threeness.

4. The Trinity is eternal. There have always been three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all of them have always been divine. One or more of them did not come into being at some point in time, or at some point become divine. The Triune God is and will be what he always has been.

5. The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence. Each of the three persons of the Trinity has had, for a period of time, a particular function unique to himself. This is to be understood as a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end, not a change in his status or essence. In human experience, there is functional subordination as well. Several equals in a business or enterprise may choose one of their number to serve as the captain of a task force or the chairperson of a committee for a given time, but without any change in rank. In like fashion, the

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Son did not during his earthly incarnation become less than the Father, but he did subordinate himself functionally to the Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (see John 14–16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that he is less than they are.

6. The Trinity is incomprehensible. We cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. When someday we see God, we shall see him as he is, and understand him better than we do now. Yet even then we will not totally comprehend him.

The Search for Analogies

The problem in constructing a statement of the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely to understand the terminology. That is in itself hard enough; for example, it is difficult to know what "person" means in this context. More difficult yet is to understand the interrelationships among the members of the Trinity. The human mind occasionally seeks analogies which will help in this effort.

On a popular level, analogies drawn from physical nature have often been utilized. A widely used analogy, for example, is the egg: it consists of yolk, white, and shell, all of which together form one whole egg. Another favorite analogy is water: it can be found in solid, liquid, and vaporous forms. At times other material objects have been used as illustrations. One pastor, in instructing young catechumens, attempted to clarify the threeness yet oneness by posing the question, "Is (or are) trousers singular or plural?" His answer was that trousers is singular at the top, and they are plural at the bottom.

Note that these analogies and illustrations, as well as large numbers of similar analogies drawn from the physical realm, tend to be either tritheistic or modalistic in their implications. On one hand, the analogies involving the egg and the trousers seem to suggest that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate parts of the divine nature. On the other hand, the analogy involving the various forms of water has modalistic overtones, since ice, liquid

water, and steam are modes of existence. A given quantity of water does not simultaneously exist in all three states.

One of the most creative minds in the history of Christian theology was Augustine. In *De trinitate*, which may be his greatest work, he turned his prodigious intellect to the problem of the nature of the Trinity. The major contribution of Augustine to the understanding of the Trinity is his analogies drawn from the realm of human personality. He argued that since humankind is made in the image of God, who is triune, it is therefore reasonable to expect to find, through an analysis of human nature, a reflection, however faint, of God's triunity. With this thought in mind, let us examine two analogies drawn from the realm of human experience.

The first analogy is drawn from the realm of individual human psychology. As a self-conscious person, I may engage in internal dialogue with myself. I may take different positions and interact with myself. I may even engage in a debate with myself. Furthermore, I am a complex human person with multiple roles and responsibilities in dynamic interplay with one another. As I consider what I should do in a given situation, the husband, the father, the seminary professor, and the United States citizen that together constitute me may mutually inform one another.

One problem with this analogy is that in human experience it is most clearly seen in situations where there is tension or competition, rather than harmony, between the individual's various positions and roles. The discipline of abnormal psychology affords us with extreme examples of virtual warfare between the constituent elements of the human personality. But in God, by contrast, there are always perfect harmony, communication, and love.

The other analogy is from the sphere of interpersonal human relations. Take the case of identical twins. In one sense, they are of the same essence, for their genetic makeup is identical. An organ transplant from one to the other can be accomplished with relative ease, for the recipient's body will not reject the donor's organ as foreign; it will accept it as its very own. Identical twins are very close in other ways as

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well. They have similar interests and tastes. Although they have different spouses and different employers, a close bond unites them. And yet they are not the same person. They are two, not one.

These two analogies emphasize different aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. The former puts major stress upon the oneness. The latter illustrates more clearly the threeness. From a logical standpoint, both cannot be true simultaneously, at least as far as we can understand. May it not be that what we have here is a mystery? We must cling to both, even though we cannot see the exact relationship between the two.

Perhaps this mystery which we must cling to in order to preserve the full data is, as Augustus Strong puts it, "inscrutable." Yet theologians are not the only ones who must retain two polarities as they function. Physicists have never finally and perfectly resolved the question of the nature of light. One theory says that it is waves. The other says it is quanta, little bundles of energy as it were. Logically it cannot be both. Yet,

to account for all the data, one must hold both theories simultaneously.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a crucial ingredient of our faith. Each of the three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to be worshiped, as is the Triune God. And, keeping in mind their distinctive work, it is appropriate to direct prayers of thanks and of petition to each of the members of the Trinity, as well as to all of them collectively. Furthermore, the perfect love and unity within the Godhead model for us the oneness and affection that should characterize our relationships within the body of Christ.

It appears that Tertullian was right in affirming that the doctrine of the Trinity must be divinely revealed, not humanly constructed. It is so absurd from a human standpoint that no one would have invented it. We do not hold the doctrine of the Trinity because it is self-evident or logically cogent. We hold it because God has revealed that this is what he is like. As someone has said of this doctrine:

Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind;
But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul.