

# The Triune God

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The Bible tells us there is a personal God, Creator and Ruler of the World. God, according to the Bible, is not another name for the mighty process of nature, and He is not some one part or aspect of that process, but He is a free and holy person, who created the process of nature by the fiat of His will and who is eternally independent of the universe that He has made.

Now we ask more in detail what the Bible tells us about God. When we ask that, I know we shall be met with an objection. We are seeking to know God. Well, there are many people who tell us that we ought not to seek to know God. Instead of seeking to know God, they tell us, we ought simply to feel Him; putting all theology aside, they say, we ought just to sink ourselves in the boundless ocean of God's being.

Such is the attitude of the mystics ancient and modern. But it is not the attitude of the Christian. The Christian, unlike the mystic, knows Him whom He has believed. What shall be said of a religion that depreciates theology, that depreciates the knowledge of God?

According to the Bible, we love God because He first loved us; and He has told us of His love in His holy Word. We love God, if we obey what the Bible tells us, because God has made Himself known to us and has thus shown Himself to be worthy of our love.

I do not mean to say that the Christian in his communion with God is always rehearsing consciously the things that God has told us about Himself. But underlying that sweet and blessed communion of the Christian with his God there is a true knowledge of God. A communion with God which is independent of that knowledge of God is communion with some other god and not with the living and true God whom the Bible reveals.

Every true man is resentful of slanders against a human friend. Should we not be grieved ten times more by slanders against our God? How can we possibly listen with polite complacency, then, when men break down the distinction between God and man, and drag God down to man's level? How can we possibly say, as in one way or another is so often said, that orthodoxy makes little difference? We should never talk in any such way about a human friend. We should never say with regard to a human friend that it makes no difference whether our view of him is right or wrong. How, then, can we say that absurd thing with regard to God? The really consistent Christian can have nothing whatever to do with such doctrinal indifferentism. There is nothing so dishonoring to God, he will say, as to be indifferent to the things that God has told us about Himself in His holy Word. What, then, has God told us about Himself in His Word? In the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian churches, there is the following answer to the question, "What is

God?": "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." That answer is certainly in accordance with the Bible. I think it will help us a little bit to get straight in our minds what the Bible says about God.

Notice that God is here said to be infinite, eternal and unchangeable. What is meant by saying that He is infinite? Well, the word "infinite" means without an end or a limit. Other beings are limited: God is unlimited. I suppose it is easy for us to fall into our ordinary spatial conceptions in trying to think of God. We may imagine ourselves passing from the earth to the remotest star known to modern astronomy -- many, many light-years away. Well, when we have got there, we are not one slightest fraction of an inch nearer to fathoming infinity than we were when we started. We might imagine ourselves traveling ten million times ten million times farther still, and still we should not be any nearer to infinity than when we started. We cannot conceive a limit to space, but neither can we conceive of infinite space. Our mind faints in the presence of infinity.

But we were really wrong in using those spatial conceptions in thinking of infinity, and particularly wrong were we in using spatial conceptions in thinking of the infinite God. It may help us to the threshold of the truth to say that God pervades the whole vast area of the universe known to science, and then infinitely more; it may help us to the threshold of the truth to say that God inhabits infinite space: but when we look a little deeper we see that space itself belongs to finite things and that the notion of infinite space is without meaning. God created space when He created finite things. He Himself is beyond space. There is no near and no far to Him. Everything to Him is equally near.

So it is when we try to think of God as eternal. If the word "infinity" is related, by way of contrast, to the notion of space, so the word "eternity" is related by way of contrast, to the notion of time. When we say that God is eternal, we mean that He had no beginning and that He will have no end. But we really mean more than that. We mean that time has no meaning for Him, save in connection with the creatures that He has made. He created time when He created finite creatures. He Himself is beyond time. There is no past and no future to Him. The Bible puts that in poetical language when it says: "For a thousand years in thy sight are as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." We of course are obliged to think of the actions of God as taking place in time. We are obliged to think of Him as doing one thing after another thing; we are obliged to think of Him as doing this today and that tomorrow. We have a perfect right so to think, and the Bible amply confirms us in that right. To us there is indeed such a thing as past and present and future, and when God deals with us He acts in a truly temporal series. But to God Himself all things are equally present. There is no such thing as "before" or "after" to Him.

It is very important to see clearly that God is thus infinite, eternal and unchangeable. These attributes of God are often denied. Those who have denied them told us that God is a finite God. We must not blame Him, they tell us, if things are not just right in the world. He is doing the best He can, they say; He is trying to

bring order out of chaos, but He is faced by a recalcitrant material which He did not create and which He can mold only gradually and imperfectly to His will. It is our business to help Him, and while we may at first sight regret that we have not the all-powerful God that we used to think we had, yet we can comfort ourselves with the inspiring thought that the God that we do have needs our help and indeed cannot do without it.

What shall we say of such a finite God? I will tell you plainly what I think we ought to say about Him. He is not God but a god. He is a product of men's thoughts. Men have made many such little gods. Of the making of gods, as of the making of books, there is no end. But, as for us Christians, with our Bibles before us, we turn from all such little gods of man's making, out towards the dread mystery of the infinite and eternal, and say, as Augustine said, with a holy fear: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." The definition in the Shorter Catechism, which we are taking to give us our outline of what the Bible tells us about God, says not only that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His being and in His power and in His holiness, but also that He is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His wisdom and in His justice, goodness and truth.

Does that seem surprising to you in the light of what we have just been saying? Well, perhaps it might seem to be surprising. These qualities -- wisdom, justice, goodness and truth -- are such startlingly human qualities. Can we ascribe them to that infinite, eternal and unchangeable God of whom we have just been speaking? If we do try to ascribe them to that God, are we not guilty of a naive anthropomorphism? Are we not guilty of the childish error of thinking of God as though He were just a big man up in the sky? Are we not guilty of making a god in our own image?

The answer is: No, we are not guilty of that. If we think of God as having some attributes which we also possess, we may conceivably be doing it for one or the other of two reasons. In the first place, we may be doing it because we are making God in our own image. But, in the second place, we may be doing it because God has made us in His image.

The Bible tells us that this second alternative is correct. God made man in the image of God, and that is the reason why God possesses some attributes which man also possesses, though God possesses them to an infinitely higher degree. The Bible is not afraid of speaking of God in a startlingly tender and human sort of way. It does so just in passages where the majesty of God is set forth. "It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth," says the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, "and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers." "All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity." But what says that same fortieth chapter of Isaiah about this same terrible God? Here is what it says: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those who are with young." How wonderfully the Bible sets forth the tenderness of God! Is that merely figurative? Are we wrong in thinking of God in such childlike fashion? Many

philosophers say so. They will not think of God as a person. Oh, no. That would be dragging Him down too much to our level! So they make of Him a pale abstraction. The Bible seems childish to them in the warm, personal way in which it speaks of God.

Are those philosophers right or is the Bible right? Thank God, the Bible is right. The philosophers despise children who think of God as their heavenly Father. But the philosophers are wrong and the children are right. Did not our Lord Jesus say: "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."

No, God is no pale abstraction. He is a person. That simple truth -- precious possession of simple souls -- is more profound than all the philosophies of all the ages.

But now we come to a great mystery. God, according to the Bible, is not just one person, but He is three persons in one God. That is the great mystery of the Trinity.

The Trinity is revealed to us only in the Bible. God has revealed some things to us through nature and through conscience. But the Trinity is not among them. This He has revealed to us by supernatural revelation and by supernatural revelation alone.

The New Testament is founded throughout on the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine was really established by the great facts of the incarnation of the Son of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, even before it was enunciated in words. What the New Testament ordinarily does is to state parts of the doctrine, so that when we put those parts together, and when we summarize them, we have the great doctrine of the three persons and one God. For example, all passages in the New Testament where the deity of Jesus Christ is set forth are, when taken in connection with passages setting forth the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit, passages supporting the doctrine of the Trinity.

But what needs to be observed now is that although by far the larger part of the Biblical teaching about the Trinity is given in that incidental and partial way -- presupposing the doctrine rather than formally enunciating it as a whole -- yet there are some passages where the doctrine is definitely presented by the mention, together, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The most famous of such passages, I suppose, is found in the great commission, given by the risen Lord to His disciples according to the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." There we have a mention of all three persons of the Trinity in the most complete co-ordination and equality-- yet all three persons are plainly not three Gods but one. Here, in this solemn commission by our Lord, the God of all true Christians is forever designated as a triune God.

We think also, for example, of the apostolic benediction at the end of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." Here the

terminology is a little different from that in the great commission. Paul speaks of the Son as "the Lord." But the word "Lord" in the Pauline Epistles is plainly a designation of deity, like the other Greek word which is translated into English by the word "God." It is the Greek word used to translate the holy name of God, "Jehovah," in the Greek translation of the Old Testament which Paul used, and Paul does not hesitate to apply to Christ Old Testament passages which speak of Jehovah.

That brings us to something supremely important in the teaching of the whole New Testament about the Trinity. It is this -- that the New Testament writers, in presenting God as triune, are never for one moment conscious of saying anything that could by any possibility be regarded as contradicting the Old Testament teaching that there is but one God. That teaching is at the very heart and core of the Old Testament. It is every whit as much at the heart and core of the New Testament. The New Testament is just as much opposed as the Old Testament is to the thought that there are more Gods than one. Yet the New Testament with equal clearness teaches that the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and that these three are not three aspects of the same person but three persons standing in a truly personal relationship to one another. There we have the great doctrine of the three persons but one God.

That doctrine is a mystery. No human mind can fathom it. Yet what a blessed mystery it is! The Christian's heart melts within him in gratitude and joy when he thinks of the divine love and condescension that has thus lifted the veil and allowed us sinful creatures a look into the very depths of the being of God.

I ask you now to consider one great central part of the doctrine, the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the Bible says that Christ is God, it does not ask us to forget a single thing that it has said about the stupendous majesty of God. No, it asks us to remember every one of those things in order that we may apply them all to Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us in the first verse that God in the beginning created the heaven and the earth. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Jesus Christ is God? No, it asks us to remember that. It says of Jesus Christ: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."

The Bible tells us that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? No, it tells us to remember that. "I am Alpha and Omega," says Christ, "the beginning and the end, the first and the last." "Before Abraham was, I am." "In the beginning was the Word." "He is before all things, and by him all things consist."

The Bible tells us that God is holy. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? Let the whole New Testament give the answer.

The Bible tells us that God is mysterious. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Christ is God? No, it tells us that there are mysteries in Christ which only God can know. No one knoweth the Son but the Father, says Jesus, as no one knoweth the Father but the Son.

The Bible tells us that God is the final judge. Does it ask us to forget that when it tells us that Jesus is God? No, Jesus Himself said in the Sermon on the Mount that He would sit upon the judgment throne to judge all the earth.

Everywhere it is the same. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation presents a stupendous view of God, and then it tells us that Jesus Christ is all that God is. Machen (1881-1937) was Professor of New Testament, first at Princeton Theological Seminary, and afterwards at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Excerpts from *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (1936).

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So it is when we try to think of God as eternal. If the word "infinity" is related, by way of contrast, to the notion of space, so the word "eternity" is related by way of contrast, to the notion of time. When we say that God is eternal, we mean that He had no beginning and that He will have no end. But we really mean more than that. We mean that time has no meaning for Him, save in connection with the creatures that He has made. He created time when He created finite creatures. He Himself is beyond time. There is no past and no future to Him. The Bible puts that in poetical language when it says: "For a thousand years in thy sight are as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." We of course are obliged to think of the actions of God as taking place in time. We are obliged to think of Him as doing one thing after another thing; we are obliged to think of Him as doing this today and that tomorrow. We have a perfect right so to think, and the Bible amply confirms us in that right. To us there is indeed such a thing as past and present and future, and when God deals with us He acts in a truly temporal series. But to God Himself all things are equally present. There is no such thing as "before" or "after" to Him.

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