



SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

2. The Doctrine of God

Rev. Dr John M. Brentnall

PART ONE: THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

1. The Knowledge of God in Scripture and in Christ

We must not forget that the revelation made by God is the revelation of *Himself*. This fact prompts the observations that:

- (1) Since God is infinitely blessed in Himself, having no need of anyone or anything outside Himself, this act was sovereign and voluntary. It simply *pleased* Him to create the universe and then to reveal Himself to His creatures in it.
- (2) In making this revelation He desires to show us what a glorious Being He is, in order that we may love, serve and adore Him.
- (3) This transcendently glorious Being is therefore both the fountain and subject of all true theology.
- (4) Hence it follows that all un-Biblical and anti-Biblical representations of God (for example, such as are held by Judaism, the world's ethnic religions and philosophies) are false and to be rejected.

A. The Three Systems of Theology

Now when we survey the range of theological thought made since God completed the revelation of Himself in Holy Scripture, we find that, roughly speaking, men have responded to it in three different ways. We will classify these three responses as Pelagian, Arminian and Calvinist; alternatively, Socinian, Remonstrant and Reformed.

We find too that their fundamental response determines all their thinking in every branch of Systematic Theology. That is to say, whatever presuppositions they lay as a foundation inevitably shows itself in the conclusions they reach. For example, if they adopt a Pelagian position in general (following the scheme of the ancient heretic Pelagius) their view of God, of Man, of Christ, of Salvation, of the Church and of the Last Things will be Pelagian. etc.

It should be of great service to us to know what these conflicting positions are before we investigate the Biblical teaching on God Himself. The following simple outline has been drawn up from A. A. Hodge's *Outlines of Theology*.

The *Pelagian* view of God is that:

- (1) Divine unity is inconsistent with a trinity. This is Unitarianism. Here the Father alone is God, the Son is Man and the Spirit is a power or influence.
- (2) There is no vindicatory justice in God. Sinners are accepted on the ground of their repentance rather than on the propitiatory and expiatory sacrifice of Christ.
- (3) Future contingent events all lie outside the sphere of God's fore-knowledge.

The *Arminian* view of God is that:

- (1) His vindicatory justice is relaxable, so that man can be saved on lower terms than the inflexible justice of God demands.
- (2) God certainly fore-knows all the future events that are not determined by His will.
- (3) His decree of election is conditional upon man's fore-seen faith, obedience and perseverance.

The *Calvinistic* view of God is that:

- (1) God is tri-une, all-knowing and all-determining.
- (2) Vindicatory justice in God is essential and unrelaxable.
- (3) Election is free, sovereign and unconditional.

B. The Right Response to God's Revelation in Scripture

The next question we must address is how *we* should respond to the revelation that God has made of Himself in Scripture. We do this because, right at the birth of the New Testament Church, evil men infiltrated the sacred community and poisoned the knowledge of God at its fountain. John refers to these as 'antichrists'. Then he comforts the people of God with the reminder that they already know the truth concerning God. (1 John 2:18-21).

Paul hones this point more finely when, in the same breath in which he speaks "even weeping" of Christ's enemies, he confesses that his own supreme quest in life is to know God as revealed in Christ. (Philippians

3:18,10). His ardent cry: “that I may know Him” is the cry of every true theologian. A.W. Tozer puts our quest in its true perspective with his title *The Pursuit of God*. “It is not mere words that nourish the soul,” he says, “but God Himself. . . . The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of . . . God Himself in the core and centre of their hearts.”

Lastly, let us recall again that our Saviour Himself summarizes the whole of our eternal life in the knowledge of the only true God and of Himself as the Sent One. (John 17:3). The Puritan Thomas Manton draws from this verse a lesson of great comfort: “Let us bless God that we have such a complete object for our faith. We can want [i.e., lack] nothing that have Father, Son and Spirit . . . the Father in heaven, the Son on the cross and . . . the Spirit in our hearts. . . Oh, what a treble privilege is this! Grace, love and communion [i.e., 2 Corinthians 13:4]; election, merit and actual grace. This is a mystery, felt as well as believed. We have a God to love us, a Christ to redeem us and a Spirit to apply all to the soul.” How avidly, then, should we search the Scriptures for Him!

C. Guidelines for the Study of God in His Word

Seeing then that we have such a glorious God as our God, let us draw up some guide-lines as to *how* we may seek and find Him in His Biblical revelation of Himself.

First, we must submit ourselves entirely to the whole Bible. Our great danger is to pick and choose those facts and doctrines about God which are most congenial to our corrupt and carnal minds. We are so inclined to dwell on His love and grace and mercy that we avoid considering His holiness and righteousness and justice. We find the doctrine of God reprobating sinners and consigning them to eternal punishment so repulsive to our natural feelings that we instantly reject it. We are so self-centred that we spontaneously speak of certain events and circumstances apparently favourable to us as providential while thrusting apparently unfavourable events and circumstances outside the realm of His control. We are so deeply imbued with legalism that when we hear of the wonder of Christ and the freeness of His grace to the hell-deserving, we will not come to Him that we might have life. This will not do. The whole Bible is God’s revelation of Himself, and we must

submit unreservedly to all its teachings. Our doctrine must be exclusively Scriptural.

Second, because all the things of God are infinitely beyond us and beyond the grasp of our finite, sin-warped minds, we must cast ourselves entirely into His hands for the least grain of true knowledge from Him. We are seeking to know God, in all His majesty and glory and beauty, the God who dwells in light unapproachable. Therefore we must humbly lie at His feet, waiting for Him to instruct us and show us Himself.

Third, we must receive whatever he shows us, even when we cannot understand it at all. Asks Agar in astonishment: “What is His name, and what is His Son’s name, if thou canst tell?” (Proverbs 30:4). “Can we wonder,” asks Charles Bridges, “that Agar should have acknowledged his *brutishness*, now that he was contemplating the majesty of God, so wondrous in His works, so incomprehensible in His nature? . . . How can we express Him in words, or conceive of Him in thought? Child of God, be still, and know that He is God. (Psalm 46:10). Restrain thy reason. Humble thy faith. Lay thine hand upon thy mouth. Lie in the dust before Him.” God is a mystery to us. Who can grasp the Trinity? or the Origin of Sin? or the Incarnation? or the New Birth? or the Resurrection of the Dead? Nevertheless, we must receive whatever He shows us, whether we understand it or not. Remember, “he that cometh to God must *believe* that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6). Just as “*through faith* we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God” (Hebrews 11:3), so through faith we must understand everything else He reveals to us. Remember Augustine’s dictum: “I believe in order that I may understand.” The language of faith therefore is: “In the Bible God has revealed everything I need to know in preparation for my momentous meeting with Him in eternity. If it is not in the Bible I am content not to know it.”

Fourth, we must never allow ourselves to fall into the subtle snare of mixing the pure theology of God’s Word with the tainted conjectures of philosophy. We all come into this world with warped ideas of God and of everything else. These ideas are re-enforced by the opinions we acquire from others, from society, from church traditions, from personal prejudice, from party spirit, from our own puerile attempts at logical reasoning and from our own experiences of life. All these must be rigorously purged from us. Otherwise we will taint truth at its source and inevitably go astray.

Let us consider just one example, indicating the deleterious influence of flawed human logic: that of *Hyper-Calvinism* and *Arminianism*. John ‘Rabbi’ Duncan once said that they were two opposite branches sprouting from the same tree-trunk. How is this? Well, *Hyper-Calvinism* says that because man cannot by himself repent of sin and believe the Gospel (which is true), then God does not require his repentance and faith, and no preacher has the right to call men to repent and believe (which is false). On the other hand *Arminianism* says that God commands men to repent and believe (which is true), therefore man is able to do so when he co-operates with offered grace (which is false). In both cases, man’s obligation is related to his ability. *Hyper-Calvinism* says that because he has no ability, man is not obliged. *Arminianism* says that he is obliged because he has the ability. Both are caught in the snare of their own logic. This is rationalistic philosophy, not theology.

What does Holy Scripture say? “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Genesis 6:5). “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” (Jeremiah 17:9). “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.” (Jeremiah 13:23). “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.” (Mark 7:20-21). “Repent ye, and believe the Gospel.” (Mark 1:15). “God commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30). “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out.” (Acts 3:19). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16). “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (Acts 16:31). Here we see stated so clearly the truths that while man is incurably wicked and wholly unable to change himself, yet God calls on him both to repent and believe. Receiving both these truths is the only safeguard against rationalistic error.

Perhaps most insidious of all in this connection is our innate natural tendency to bend everything we come across to our wants, desires, likes and dislikes. A great idol called *Self* lies hidden deep in the temple of our heart, and it is ruthlessly prepared to shape everything, even the revealed

knowledge of God, to its own liking and ends. How we need, as Samuel Rutherford acknowledged, to be “ransomed and redeemed by Christ from that master-tyrant, that cruel and lawless lord, *myself*.”

Fifth, the truths we embrace about God must be stated in Holy Scripture plainly and clearly. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* wisely states for our encouragement: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.” Observe how careful the Gospel-writer Luke is to set down only “those things which are most surely believed amongst us,” in order that Theophilus “might know the certainty of those things.” (Luke 1:1-4). Some parts of Scripture are indeed very obscure to us, yet for all that, “the Bible is a plain book.” (Charles Hodge). Martin Luther went so far as to claim that “there was never written on earth a clearer book than Holy Scripture”, but this was only after a long night of darkness in his soul.

There are, however, certain matters in Scripture concerning God about which we cannot speak with finality, because they are not revealed. When we meet them, we should humbly acknowledge our ignorance and say that we do not know. Since we cannot prove them, we should be content to wait till they are made perfectly clear by the light of eternal glory. Nevertheless we may be confident, as we compare Scripture with Scripture and seek to live out what we discover, that the clearer parts will explain the more obscure. For “the path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” (Proverbs 4:18).

The fact that all essential and fundamental truths concerning Him are clearly revealed in Scripture is the prime reason why we must reject so much that passes for theology today. To understand much modern religious thought we are expected to be familiar with semantics, or church dogma, or the latest trends in academic thought. All this is unnecessary. In everything pertaining to life and salvation, and to the glorifying and enjoying of God, the Scriptures are perfectly clear.

Sixth, we must never draw our conclusions from only one verse or part of a verse or one single passage of Scripture. Vast areas of useless speculation have been opened up to many dabblers in theology, for

example, by their erecting entire systems of eschatology on the phrase: “and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.” (Revelation 20:4). Rather, we must gather *all* the relevant proof texts for a doctrine, collate them and cautiously set down our conclusions on the basis of our findings. Even after we have done this, let us never imagine that we have exhausted the oracles of God. Rather, let us heed the words of the pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers, John Robinson: “The Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word.”

Seventh, we must never reach a conclusion about God which blatantly contradicts a known truth of Scripture. We must “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). If we arrive at a conclusion which clashes with a known doctrinal truth concerning Him, then our conclusion must be wrong. This is because the Holy Spirit, the Divine Author of Scripture, never contradicts Himself. As only He searches the deep things of God, so He reveals only what is in God. Some, for example, used to reason in the following way: “Creation took place 4,000 years before the Incarnation. When a further 2,000 years have elapsed the Millennium will begin. Because every thousand years of our time is like a day in God’s reckoning,” they said, “and because the Sabbath followed God’s six days of creative activity, then after 6,000 years Christ will come and inaugurate a world-wide millennium of untold prosperity and blessing.”

This is not only unwarrantable allegorization, but sheer speculation. The Scriptures tell us plainly: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.” (Matthew 24:36). With this assurance we rest content.

May we seek to keep these guide-lines before us throughout our whole lives, and especially as we study the towering truths about Himself, His plans, works and glory that God has graciously shown us in His Word.

D. God can be Known as Saviour only in Christ

Many systematic theologies tend to forget one of the most important truths of the Bible; namely, that God has revealed Himself adequately to mankind only in Christ. Consequently they deal with God ‘in the abstract’, as it were. But God cannot be known at all in His mercy and grace apart from Christ. Outside Christ, God terrifies us, and we dare not go near Him. But in Christ He reveals Himself as a reconciled Father and Friend. This is no human invention, devised for our comfort. It is a divine revelation. Scripture expressly tells us that the light of the

knowledge of the glory of God shines into our hearts only in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). As “the brightness of the Father’s glory and the express image of His person” (Hebrews 1:3) Christ has given us as much knowledge of God as we need to possess. As He Himself says: “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” (John 14:9).

In relation to the attributes of God the Puritan Robert Asty expounds this truth with fervent devotion. He says: “Jesus is the Exhibitor, Revealer and Unfolder of all the fullness of the blessed and glorious attributes of God in a way of salvation. God is thy God in and through Jesus Christ, and not otherwise. God absolutely in Himself dwells in light inaccessible, and is a consuming fire; we cannot make an approach to God as He is absolutely considered, and live; but now in and through Jesus Christ God may be spoken with, and all His attributes and the properties of His nature are savingly enjoyable. . . . All the attributes of God are enough to strike terror into the soul that hath no interest in Jesus But now, in and through Jesus all God’s attributes are reconciled to, and engaged for, the believer, and he may see that which may comfort him and . . . satisfy him.”

Asty proceeds to consider God’s justice, power, wisdom, patience, love, goodness, mercy, immensity, benignity and eternity as terrible to us outside Christ, but as engaged for us in Him. Finally, he applies this great truth to the comfort of every believer: “Whatever discouragement, Christian, thou hast here below, look up to Jesus, and thou mayest see encouragement. Hast thou men that are engaged against thee? Look up to Jesus, and thou mayest see God in Him engaged to be thy God: God’s power engaged for thee, God’s mercy, God’s name and God’s glory, all engaged for thee.” William Bates, in his *Harmony of the Divine Attributes*, says the same.

Furthermore, all the covenanted purposes of God for His people are ratified and fulfilled only in Christ. “It is in and for Christ,” says John Hieron, “that God made the New Covenant [ie. the Covenant of Grace]; it is in Christ that God is reconciling the world to Himself, that He owneth [ie acknowledges] any people or person as His; it is in Him that God is our Father, that we are His sons and daughters, that God made us any promise or meaneth us any good - all is in Christ Election to salvation is in Christ, Effectual Calling is in Christ, Reconciliation is in Christ In Christ we are quickened [ie given spiritual life] . . . justified . . . sanctified . . . by Him we have freedom from the dominion of

sin . . . access unto the Father's presence, may pray with filial boldness; He is our Advocate to plead our cause . . . He makes us perfect and complete; He gives consolation answerable to afflictions; He giveth His people victory; in Him they are more than conquerors All grace, all glory, floweth from the love and favour of God through Him."

It is essential, therefore, that we contemplate God in Christ, for every part of God's purpose and its fulfillment is as related to Him as the spokes of a wheel are to their hub. He is central to all theology. It is also experientially necessary that we do so, for approaching God in Christ is the only way we can endure the dazzling light and crushing weight of His glory. No man can see God and live. But in Christ we may not merely see Him, but commune with Him and enjoy Him.

Even possessing such a privilege as this, we must shun all irreverent familiarity with God. Though He is our Father, He is a venerable Father, a heavenly Father and a holy Father.

Similarly, we must guard against neglecting those passages of Scripture in which the holy and righteous wrath of God is revealed against sin without any reference to Christ. Such catastrophes as the Flood, the Confusion of Tongues and the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah all reveal God. And they are all written down and preserved in Holy Scripture for our learning.

The foregoing remarks in this Module are to be regarded as preliminary to our study of God in His essence and attributes, of the Persons of the Godhead, and of His Intrinsic and Extrinsic Works, all of which form part of the revealed doctrine of God.



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ASSIGNMENTS

Test Yourself!

Pause for reflection:

1. Quote in full ONE Biblical text for EACH of the following as proving that God has revealed Himself to mankind:

- (a) Voluntarily, or without necessity.

- (b) In order to display His own glorious Being.

- (c) As the fountain of all true theology.

- (d) As the subject of all true theology.

- (e) Contrary to every non-Biblical representation of Him.

2. Prove from Scripture that the Calvinistic view of God, over against the Pelagian and Arminian views, is the true Scriptural view.

3. List the seven guidelines for the study of God in the Biblical revelation.

4. State why it is essential:

(a) To study the attributes and purposes of God chiefly as they are revealed to us in Christ.

(b) Not to neglect the self-revelation of God out of Christ.



2. The Knowledge of God through the Knowledge of His Attributes

“Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable.” (Psalm 145.3). So sings the sweet Psalmist of Israel.

The church father Augustine takes up this adoring strain in the first lines of his *Confessions*: “Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud; yet would man praise Thee . . . Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee.”

It is with the same sense of the indescribable greatness of God that Herman Witsius confesses: “O Lord Jehovah, how little do we poor miserable mortals know of Thy supreme deity and incomprehensible perfections! How far short do our thoughts come about Thee, who art infinite or immense in Thy Being, Thine attributes, Thy sovereignty May the consciousness of our ignorance . . . kindle in our hearts an ineffable desire for that beatific vision by which, knowing as we are known, we may in the abyss of Thine infinity behold those things which no thought of ours at present can reach.”

And so we exclaim with Hugh Binning: “We are now about this question, what God is. But who can answer it? Or if answered, who can understand it? It is a mystery, a hidden mystery, not for want of light, but for too much light. It is a secret; it is wonderful, out of the reach of all created capacity. . . . What name can express that incomprehensible Majesty? The mind is more comprehensive than words, but the mind . . . is too narrow to conceive Him. O then, how short a garment must all words, [even] the most significant and comprehensive and superlative words, be? This is the chief point of saving knowledge, to know God; and this is the first point or degree of the true knowledge of God: to discern how ignorant we are of Him, and to find Him beyond all knowledge.” This is our starting-point.

Because of the waywardness of our hearts, always ready to depart from the living God, we need constantly to remind ourselves that when His Holy Spirit guides us our knowledge of Him must unerringly lead us to worship Him, to bow before Him in wonder, love and praise. This is precisely what our Lord Himself tells the woman of Samaria: “Ye

worship ye know not what . . . God is a spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth . . . For the Father seeketh such to worship Him.” (John 4:22, 24, 23). His apostle Paul tells the pagan Athenians the same thing: “As I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.” (Acts 17:23). Then he proceeds to unfold to them some of God’s glorious attributes. The whole intention of both our Lord and His apostle, we observe, is thoroughly practical. And unless our purpose in considering God is the same, we study Him to our own condemnation. Our entire object in these courses should be to know Him so as to trust, love, serve and worship Him as our God. He has graciously condescended to meet with us and reveal Himself to us. The least we can do is seek grace to respond appropriately to such abounding grace.

A. The Attributes of God

The Problem of Classification

A preliminary caution is needed here. In Systematic Theology we are forced to deal with the attributes of God. That is, because God has revealed Himself as possessing certain distinguishing qualities, or characteristics, (Calvin calls them ‘virtues’), we are compelled to distinguish them for the sake of clarity and as a basis of understanding. Yet we must never imagine that we can frame an adequate definition or description of God. His greatness is unsearchable.

Forgetfulness of this has led even the most gifted Reformed theologians into a maze of artificial and scholastic distinctions that leave the mind confounded rather than enlightened. Heinrich Heppé’s *Reformed Dogmatics* (a systematic theology drawn up from the old Protestant dogmaticians along with Heppé’s own comments) is subtle to the point of abstraction in this respect. While reading them, one receives the impression that these eminently learned men are driven by the need to systematize rather than to worship. The cold, clinical nature of their analysis is utterly devoid of the element of adoration. They suggest all kinds of categories, such as “natural and moral, absolute and relative, original and derived, active and inactive, transitive and intransitive, or . . . incommunicable and communicable.” (Reymond). They wrack their brains in the effort to define, describe, categorize and comprehend God. But every attempt to do so merely brings to light the essential puniness of the mind of man. They have striven to attain the unattainable. We

conclude, therefore, that perfect classification is impossible, simply because God is God.

1. The Westminster Divines in their *Confession of Faith* (2.1-2) wisely make no attempt to classify the attributes of God. They simply string out a list, interwoven with relevant Biblical texts. The result is somewhat haphazard. Yet while reading it we are humbled under a sense of the weight of their difficulty.

2. The nearest thing in Calvin to a treatment of God's attributes is in the *Institutes* (1.10.2). Yet here too they are not handled systematically.

3. In their treatment of the subject, such modern 'popular' writers as Arthur Pink and A.W.Tozer merely draw up a list, dealing with each attribute more or less as it suggests itself to them.

4. In their *Shorter Catechism*, however, the Westminster divines attempt a simple classification for those who are "of weaker capacity"! It is this: "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." Some writers say that the divines were seeking a suitable definition and that when they called on the Scottish commissioner George Gillespie to pray, he began with these words! Others claim that the appropriate committee, under the guidance of John Arrowsmith, hammered it out. Whatever the truth, this compact statement has served both theologians and non-theologians well for centuries. Charles Hodge, himself no mean theologian, regarded it as "probably the best definition of God ever penned by man." Perhaps it is more accurate to say with Robert Reymond that it is a "catechetical *description* of the glory of the Tri-une God."

5. Significantly enough, the Scriptures themselves nowhere classify God's attributes. Sometimes, it is true, they group several attributes together in the same sentence (especially in such doxologies as 1 Timothy 1:17—"Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen." and Jude 24, 25—"Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.") But nowhere do they group them in systematic order.

This fact itself reminds us that Systematic Theology is beset with severe limitations. It may be able to categorize, for example, the Miracles of Christ, but it can never categorize God. How thankful we should be that God thwarts every attempt to bring Him within the confines of our finite and sin-blinded minds!

Preliminary Points regarding the Attributes

First, each and every attribute is essential to God's nature. They are aspects of His Being which distinguish Him as God. (For example, God's mercy is Himself being merciful, His justice is Himself being just, His faithfulness is Himself being faithful.) Without them, or any one of them, He would cease to be God. When Scripture sets itself to contrast Him with idols, it does so by magnifying His attributes as distinctive to Himself. (See Isaiah 40:9-31; Psalm 115.)

Second, they are equal in importance. No attribute stands in isolation above the others to be considered as primary. Scripture identifies God's essence with all His attributes equally. He is "light" (1 John 1:5), He is "love" (1 John 4:8), He is "a spirit" (John 4:24), He is "a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29), He is "holy" (1 Peter 1:16). "Every attribute is identical with His Being . . . Whatever God is, He is completely and simultaneously." (Herman Bavinck).

Third, the distinction made by Scripture between each attribute is real, and not merely verbal. For example, God's mercy is not His justice (though in this world His justice is always mingled with mercy), His holiness is not His power (though it is exercised in power) and His wisdom is not His faithfulness (though He is always wise in proving His faithfulness). We must therefore not view these terms as mere names of His attributes, but as real expressions of His glorious perfections.

Fourth, each and every attribute pertains to God as the Tri-une God. As the Athanasian Creed says: "the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal . . . The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. . . . So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty." etc. The Puritan Francis Roberts makes a magnificent statement to this effect: "The supreme Being of beings, Cause of causes, and most spiritual Spirit, the one only true God — Father, Son and Holy Ghost — is most absolutely simple, all-

sufficient, immutable, infinite, immense and eternal in His life, understanding, truth, will, goodness, graciousness, love, mercy, longsuffering, justice, holiness, power, dominion, perfection, excellency, blessedness and gloriousness.”

Fifth, we cannot know God savingly in any of His attributes except in Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, is the glory of God revealed for our salvation. As they appear most gloriously in Him, so we must strain the eyes of our hearts to gaze on them in all their revealed glory in Him. He is the image of the invisible God, or, as John Owen says, the representative image of God to us. We may form a vague mental idea of the attributes of God without Christ, but we shall never really know Him so as to love and fear Him without seeing His glory in the face of Christ.

The Attributes Themselves

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*'s description of God first tells us what God is: “a spirit”. Then it describes Him in three transcendental adjectives: “infinite, eternal and unchangeable”. Finally it describes through various nouns what kind of God He is: “in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” As Reymond acutely and relevantly observes: by using the term “His”, this representation introduces God to us as a personal God. He is not some vague, mystic essence or ‘soul of the world’ or sum total of all that is, but the living, personal God who has an infinitely rich personal life within Himself, and who is the only Source of personal life in His animate, intelligent creatures.

1. The Spirituality of God

“God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24). Comments Hugh Binning: “God is a spirit, that is His nature; and man must worship Him, that is his duty; . . . in spirit and in truth, that is the right manner of the duty. If these three were well pondered,” he continues, “till they did sink into the bottom of our spirits, they would make us indeed Christians, not in the letter, but in the spirit.”

When Scripture says that “God is a spirit,” or, as Leon Morris suggests, “God is spirit,” it informs us that He is immaterial, that He has no body, that He is “not extended, or divisible, or compounded, or visible, or tangible.” (Charles Hodge). As such, He can neither be contained within

any place nor excluded from any space. Acts 17:24, 28; 1 Timothy 1:17 and 6:16 confirm this conclusion.

It is important to point out also that God is a personal spirit. He thinks, feels, wills and acts. He can love and hate, pity and pardon, save and destroy, justify and condemn, hear and answer prayer. He is a self-conscious, free spirit, who reflects on Himself and interacts with other spirits whom He has created. He is One who can say “I” and to whom we can say “Thou.” “As the living God, He is a hearing, speaking God.” (John Duncan). The God of Holy Scripture is not some vague, impersonal force or energy, but a spirit rich with personality.

From such Scriptures as Deuteronomy 32:40 (“I live for ever”); Psalm 84:2 (“My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God”); and 1 Kings 17:1 (“And Elijah . . . said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand”), William Ames concludes that “God’s chief title, distinguishing Him from all idols, is ‘the living God’.” As such, He is a spirit having all life in Himself and is the fountain of all life in others. “He is the Spirit of all spirits” (Binning), “the Father of spirits” (Hebrews 12:9), who animates and activates them to their various activities and influences.

“O!” cries Binning, “that you would always set this God before you, or rather set yourselves always in His presence, in whose sight you are always.”

Moreover, as a spirit God must be worshipped in spirit; i.e., when we worship Him, we must first receive from Him and then reflect back to Him what is purely spiritual. We do not worship Him in a spiritual way unless His sovereign love is imprinted on our faith, His august majesty begets in us reverence, His holiness and justice make us tremble, His goodness and mercy make us rejoice, His greatness fills us with adoration. We fear that for the most part our worship savours nothing of the spirituality of God. Yet our worship must be like the One we worship. Not only that, it must be offered to Him with true spiritual affection and sincerity.

We must also worship Him in truth. Briefly, this means that the content of our worship must be what He Himself requires, and not “will-worship.” Everything we offer Him must bear on it a divine warrant. Speaking against un-Biblical ceremonies, the Puritan William Bagshawe cries: “Men may say, I warrant you, I warrant you; but look for God’s

warrant.” The Old Testament legal ceremonies and carnal rites were abrogated in Christ, who ushered in “the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9.10), leaving us only such directives and ordinances as He Himself has commanded in the worship of God. (Matthew 28:19-20).

The spiritual worship of God must therefore have truth for its substance and spirituality for its essence.

This means especially that we must always approach God with faith in the atoning blood and prevalent intercession, the effectual mediation and merit of Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22), for hope of acceptance and blessing. Our worship is most spiritual when it is based most on, filled most with and aimed most at the glory of God in Christ.

Two further practical points need to be stressed:

(1) Because God is a spirit, let us beg Him to grant us His Spirit. When He promises to put His Spirit within us (Ezekiel 36:27), let us turn His promise into prayer. Melancthon prayed: “Lord, inflame my soul with Thy Holy Spirit.” So should we.

(2) Because God is a spirit, let us seek from Him all spiritual blessings, especially for His own gracious Presence. See Ephesians 1:3. The ‘prosperity Gospel’ of the present-day is no Gospel. It is neither money nor possessions nor influence that marks God’s blessing; but nearness to Himself, love to Christ and others, grace in the heart and godliness in the life. “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15), but in “righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” (Romans 14:17). “Remember,” urges Thomas Watson, “God who is a spirit will give spiritual rewards: a sight of His face in heaven, white robes, a weight of glory.” Augustine too reminds us: “You ask God for protection of your house, and of yourselves as you travel. Do you ever ask Him for Himself?”

2. The Infinity, Eternity and Unchangeableness of God

These are the attributes that distinguish God from angelic spirits and human souls. For while angels and men are real spirits (Hebrews 1:14; Ecclesiastes 12:7), God is an infinite, eternal and unchangeable spirit, whereas they are finite, immortal and changeable spirits. Furthermore, however ethereal such creatures as light and the heavens may seem to us, they are not spirits, as God is. In the infinity, eternity and

unchangeableness of His spirituality, God is like nothing that we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch, or even conceive. This constitutes His uniqueness as a spirit.

(a) Infinity

Firstly, we learn that God is infinite. This means that “God is without bounds or measure” (Thomas Boston), that He is “not limited, as we are” (Loraine Boettner), and that He is “immeasurable because He has no material dimension” (William Ames).

King Solomon adoringly acknowledges this when he prays: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house that I have builded.” (1 Kings 8:27). God Himself asks us in similar terms: “The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?” (Isaiah 66:1). Accordingly Paul proclaims to the Athenians: “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” (Acts 17:24).

While it is impossible to explore all the ramifications of this awe-inspiring truth, Scripture clearly associates God’s infinity with such qualities as immensity, transcendence, immanence and omnipresence. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” asks God in Jeremiah 23:24. Is He not described as “over all, God blessed for ever”? (Romans 9:5). Is it not in Him that we all “live, and move, and have our being”? (Acts 17:28). Are we not told that nowhere in the universe are we free from His presence? (Psalm 139:7-13).

And so our Protestant divines make such remarks as the following:

“Bodies are bounded by space; spirits are located in space; God fills all space.” (Charles Hodge). “He is wholly and equally present throughout infinite space.” (Alexander Stewart of Cromarty). “All the spaces in the world do not exhaust the immensity of God.” (Leonard Riisen). “God is the transcendent God.” (Louis Berkhof). “He is exalted above all we can know or think.” (Charles Hodge). “Between the creature and the Creator a great gulf is fixed.” (J. Gresham Machen). “There is no place in heaven or earth or hell where men may hide from His presence.” (A.W. Tozer). “God is the immanent God.” (Louis Berkhof). “God fills all the universe in all its parts.” (Charles Hodge). “God is nearer to us than our body is to

our soul.” (Stephen Charnock). “We live within God’s omnipresence.” (John Duncan).

The infinity of God is not to be thought of as confined to His relation to the universe; it belonged to Him before the creation of the world. As Johannes Braun says: God’s infinity “recognizes no limits in any of His perfections. Hence God’s essence and all His attributes ought to be called infinite.” In short, He is infinite in His Being, infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, infinitely holy, infinitely just, infinitely good and infinitely truthful. The infinity of God refers not merely to His timeless and non-spatial nature, but also to the absolute perfection of all His attributes.

Before the infinite nature of our God we stand in silence. Such passages as Isaiah 40:12-18, 21-23 and 25-31 should strike us dumb with astonishment. This is the spiritual posture of the Psalmist too when God’s afflicting hand is upon him: “I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good.” (Psalm 39:4). Such reverence is also enjoined on us: “Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord.” (Zechariah 2:13). Indeed, the revelation of God’s infinite wrath upon the world’s sin is made for this very purpose: “that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” (Romans 3:19).

Yet in the infinity of God lies great comfort for His people. “How satisfying,” says Tozer, “to turn from our limitations to a God who has none.” In Christ, unlimited resources of wisdom, mercy, righteousness and power are exercised for our good. Let us then bless God for His infinity.

(b) Eternity

In the Prayer of Moses, the man of God, appears a wonderful statement: “from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God.” (Psalm 90:2). We are told too in Isaiah 40:28 that the Lord is “the everlasting God.” So also Paul offers his adoration to “the King eternal.” (1 Timothy 1:17). God’s name ‘Jehovah’ (Exodus 3:7,14) points to His eternity, as does the title-description ‘Alpha and Omega.’ (Revelation 1:8).

Such exalted statements inform us that God is “without beginning, succession or ending” (Cornelius Van Til), that “His is a timeless existence, an eternal presence” (Louis Berkhof) and that “God appears at the beginning and end of time simultaneously” (A.W.Tozer). With Him, therefore, duration is an eternal now.

Reymond does not accept this absolute disjunction between time and eternity, despite the opposite conclusions of such great Christian thinkers as Augustine and Charnock. Yet there would seem to be every indication in Scripture that time is something which God created and which soon will be no more (Genesis 1:14; Revelation 10:6), while eternity is the permanent mode of His existence. The precise relationship between them is not revealed. Perhaps Tozer is nearest the truth when he says that “God dwells in eternity, but time dwells in God.” However, where Scripture does not speak, we should not hear.

What is certain, however, for the believer’s comfort, is that “the eternal God is” his “refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:27), and that though much is wrong with us and our families, He has made with us “an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.” (2 Samuel 23:5). May this be “all our salvation and all our desire,” as it was David’s. Luther drew great comfort and encouragement from God’s eternity: “God will be after us, as He was before us, and is today with us.” And since “all the perfections in the Godhead are eternal” (M. Mackay, Dores), every believer may assure himself that the wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth, even the whole Being of God, will work for his eternal welfare and blessedness.

On the other hand, “no attribute in God, however dreadful, is formidable to any but to the man who provokes Him to anger, and continues therein without repentance.” (George Hutcheson). But the ungodly, the Christless and the graceless, remaining so at death, may expect nothing at the hands of the eternal God but eternal punishment. (Matthew 25:31-33, 41, 46). Let us then flee to Christ from the wrath to come and find a sure shelter beneath the covering of His precious blood.

(c) Unchangeableness

Holy Scripture declares unequivocally: “I am the Lord: I change not.” (Malachi 3:6). It also informs us that with “the Father of lights” there is “no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” (James 1:17). This is to say that God is never unlike Himself and never differs from Himself. All His attributes being infinite and eternal, He can neither improve nor deteriorate, progress or regress. If He could do either, it would be for the better or for the worse, which, in view of His absolute perfection, is impossible. In short, He is always, only and fully God. Being who He is, He cannot cease to be what He is. His infinite Being remains eternally

the same. So Anselm addresses Him: “In no respect art Thou unlike Thyself.”

Here we must remember that all the praises of men and angels cannot make Him better or more glorious than He is. Even our mean, unworthy and even hateful thoughts of Him cannot change Him. We may resent His absolute control over us, we may regard His dealings as unjust, we may kick against His disposal of us in providence, we may complain at His decree, but we cannot change Him. “He is in one mind, and who can turn Him?” (Job 23:13). “As no-one can promote Him, so no-one can degrade Him.” (Tozer).

In this connection it is necessary to stress that both when He created the universe and when He assumed our nature in the person of the Son God did not change. He changed His relationship to the world and to man, but in Himself He suffered no change. He changes His dispensations, He changes His creatures, but He Himself does not change. In us change is unavoidable; but in God change is impossible.

There is much glory to be seen in the unchangeableness of God. Changeableness implies weakness, but there is no weakness in God. Being the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8), He cannot change in His purposes, promises or threats. “He can never be wiser or holier or more righteous or more merciful than He ever has been.” (Charles Hodge).

It is not without reason that Thomas Manton concludes that “nothing makes the saints more love God than His unchangeableness.” O then, may we in our deep need of God pray with the hymn-writer: “Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me!”

3. The Being, Wisdom, Power, Holiness, Justice, Goodness and Truth of God

When the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* tells us that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His *Being*, it indicates that these qualities belong to all His attributes. In short, the essential glory of God shines for ever with a limitless, changeless lustre.

Let us now consider some of these attributes.

(a) *Wisdom*

In Holy Scripture, God is called “the only wise God.” (1 Timothy 1:17). “He is wise in heart,” acknowledges Job (9:4). In contemplating His wondrous works of creation and providence, the Psalmist exclaims: “O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches.” (Psalm 104:24). After surveying the whole field of redemption, Paul too exclaims: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33).

This wisdom includes two things, both of which should astonish us:

1. His infinite, eternal and unchangeable knowledge. He knows Himself and everything else, both actual and possible, with a perfect, exhaustive knowledge. “All things are before Him in one clear prospect.” (Thomas Watson). The details are too numerous to mention; but they include all our thoughts and ways (Psalm 139:1-6), the entire history of the universe (Isaiah 46:10) and His own [to us] inscrutable and incomprehensible nature (1 Corinthians 2:10). So the apostle tells us that “all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13), while John crisply informs us that “God . . . knoweth all things.” (1 John 3:20).

2. Having infinite, eternal and unchangeable knowledge, God knows perfectly how to use it to the highest ends and the fulfillment of His purposes. This attribute is properly termed His wisdom. The wisdom of God is an aspect of His knowledge.

It is essential that we distinguish the two. While by His knowledge God perceives everything, by His wisdom He understands how to make every means serve all His ends. The one is theoretical, the other is practical. The one respects the mind of God, the other the will of God.

Dr D. M. Lloyd-Jones presses the importance of this distinction on us when he reminds us that modern man is full of knowledge, but tragically lacking in wisdom. He fills his mind with facts and ideas, but is so foolish in all his ways. Thankfully, this is not so with God. He not only knows and does all His will, He also knows perfectly what He is doing and He does it in the best possible way.

We have been reminded of God’s wisdom in creation and providence. The words: “Christ . . . the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24) point us

to the highest manifestation of His wisdom; namely, in the work of redemption accomplished by His Son. Here we have features that call forth our highest admiration. Indeed, the wisdom of God shines brightly in every aspect of His great salvation. Well may Paul conclude his superb exposition of that work with the doxology: “To God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen.” (Romans 16:27).

By way of application, Thomas Watson exhorts us both to adore and to rest in the wisdom of God. We are to adore it, because it is an infinite deep. Even the holy angels cannot exhaust its wonders. We are to rest in it, because God always sees what is best for us. When we have grace to do so we shall not murmur or complain, but be still and know that He is God.

(b) Power

After the Lord had taught Job the greatest lesson of his life, he humbly confesses: “I know that Thou canst do everything.” (Job 42:2). Immediately following Jeremiah’s admission: “Ah Lord God . . . there is nothing too hard for Thee,” the Lord Himself says: “Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?” (Jeremiah 32:17, 27). When Mary wondered how she as a virgin could conceive the holy child Jesus, God assured her through Gabriel: “With God nothing shall be impossible.” (Luke 1:34, 37). Contrasting the Almighty with impotent idols, the Psalmist declares elsewhere: “But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased.” (Psalm 115:3). As the canon of Holy Scripture draws to a close, John hears the voices of heaven proclaim in ineffable strains: “Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” (Revelation 19:6). All these texts either state or imply the infinite, eternal and unchangeableness of God’s power.

Thomas Boston defines the power of God as that perfection “whereby He can do whatever He pleases, and whatsoever is not repugnant to His nature.” This is a fine definition, for it reminds us that God can do only what is consistent with His holy and righteous nature, and what He has purposed or determined to do. Therefore He cannot lie (Titus 1:2), deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13), die (Revelation 4:10) or contradict Himself in any way. Such divine ‘cannots’, says John Murray truly, far from detracting from God’s glory, actually display it, for to do any of them would destroy His perfection.

We also note that God’s power is revealed:

- (1) positively: "I am the almighty God." (Genesis 17:1).
- (2) negatively: "With God nothing shall be impossible." (Luke 1:37).
- (3) comparatively: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26).

As Reymond observes, Scripture consistently and repeatedly represents God's works of creation (Romans 1:20), providence (Hebrews 1:3) and redemption (Romans 1:16, Ephesians 1:19) to be the effects of His almighty power. When we pause to consider the vast scope of its exercise, we see that it is, in the strictest sense, infinite, eternal and unchangeable.

Besides mentioning these three spheres of its operation in general, Thomas Boston takes special note of God's preservation of His Church throughout all her trials and persecutions, the conversion of His elect and His bringing them safe to glory at last, all by His almighty power. He also specifies various manifestations of the power of God in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ: His miraculous conception, the union of His two natures in His single person, the preservation of His human nature throughout His ministry and His resurrection from the dead.

Jonathan Edwards, too, remarks that God exercises His power deliberately "so as to make His hand visible, and His power conspicuous, and men's dependence on Him most evident, that no flesh should glory in His presence."

Several wondrous lessons may be learnt from the infinity, eternity and unchangeableness of God's power:

1. Despite its constant exertion throughout the entire universe, it is and never will be exhausted. [Our sun is a fitting symbol of this truth.] Not only is God able to raise up stones as children to Abraham (Matthew 3:9), He is also able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. (Ephesians 3:20). He Himself neither faints nor is weary. Rather, He gives power to the faint. (Isaiah 40:28-29). Let us then wait on Him to renew our strength.
2. Let us never doubt His word, for He is able to accomplish whatever He has promised. Neither apparent difficulties nor improbabilities should discourage our faith.
3. Those who trust in Him for salvation are sure to be kept by His power. God is able to keep them from falling and to preserve them

until the day of Christ's appearing. Their souls are safe in the arms of omnipotence, from which no enemy can snatch them. Let them therefore entrust themselves to their faithful Creator, who is sure to raise them up at the last day. Given the almighty, invincible power of God, "why should it be thought a thing incredible . . . that God should raise the dead?" (Acts 26:8).

4. On the other hand, all who continue to fight against God are bound to fall. They fight against omnipotence. And He who punishes with everlasting destruction is perfectly able to hold them down in hell, just as they held down His truth on earth. Let us then fear Him, and flee to Christ from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

(c) Holiness

Protestant divines regard this attribute in two different lights. Some view it not so much as a particular attribute as a "universal affection." (Mastricht). Consequently "it relates to the brightness of all His perfections." (à Brakel). Thomas Boston says that "holiness is the glory and beauty of God." Charnock believes that "as it is the glory of the Godhead, so it is the glory of every perfection in the Godhead . . . All would be uncomely without holiness to adorn them . . . His justice is a holy justice; His wisdom is a holy wisdom; His arm of power a holy arm; His truth or promise a holy promise." John Howe styles it "a transcendental attribute that . . . runs through the rest, and casts a glory upon every one. It is an attribute of attributes . . . It is the very lustre and glory of His other perfections. He is glorious in holiness." Tozer states the same truth simply when he writes: "Because He is holy, all His attributes are holy." Such a view is warranted by Psalm 105:3 and Luke 1:49, where the name of God (the sum total of His attributes) is described as holy. Indeed, when God swears by His holiness He swears by Himself. (Psalm 89:35; Hebrews 6:13). Yet this all-pervasive quality, while still applicable to His holiness, is more often in Scripture termed the 'glory' of God.

Others, such as Kersten and Berkhof, distinctly isolate it. Because the term 'holiness' is derived from a Hebrew root meaning to cut or divide, they see God's holiness as His infinite separation from His creation, and consequently His infinite moral purity and distance from sin. "Holiness primarily means separation - separation from evil." (D. M. Lloyd-Jones). In its positive aspect it is God's essential and absolute purity. In this

connection John Kennedy of Dingwall remarks that “God is holy in the infinity and eternity of His Being,” while Tozer adds: “He is the absolute quintessence of moral excellence.” Charles Hodge reveals both the negative and the positive aspects of God’s holiness when he informs us that “on the one hand” it “implies entire freedom from moral evil; and upon the other, absolute moral perfection.” The following passages bear out this view also: “Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, . . . glorious in holiness.” (Exodus 15:11); “Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool, for He is holy.” (Psalm 99.5); “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16). For this reason He is frequently described as “the Holy One” (Isaiah 12:6) and even addressed as “mine Holy One.” (Habakkuk 1:12).

Scripture thus indicates to us both that all God’s attributes are shot through with holiness and that we are to come before His holiness as a distinct attribute. He is both majestically transcendent and ethically spotless. Isaiah’s encounter with Him as the Holy God (Isaiah 6:1-8) produced in him the deepest reverence and sense of sin. So should all our meetings with Him. Nevertheless, restraint is placed on our understanding by the observation that though we may fear God’s power and admire His wisdom, we cannot even begin to imagine His holiness. Nevertheless, we must always view it as an essential and necessary attribute. “As He was God from eternity,” says Charnock, “so He was holy from eternity.”

From God’s holy nature proceed the holiness of all His actions (Deuteronomy 32:4), of His infinite hatred of sin (Habakkuk 1:13), and of His moral law (Romans 7:12).

A remarkable portion of Holy Scripture indicates too that His holiness is the basis of the atonement. The answer to our Lord’s cry of dereliction on the cross — “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” — is given immediately in the Psalm from which it is taken: “But Thou art holy.” (Psalm 22:1,3). In other words, “God’s holiness requires . . . that He cannot admit a sinner to union and communion with Himself without satisfaction to His justice.” (Herman Witsius). This satisfaction Christ as our Surety-Substitute undertook to render. How thankful we should be that He succeeded in rendering it.

Furthermore, the holiness of God is the fountain of holiness in His people: “I am the Lord which sanctify you,” (Leviticus 20:8) and of His

delight in their holiness. (Proverbs 11:20). Thus God's saints become partakers of His holiness and enjoy the unique privilege of having their Sanctifier look with pleasure on His own work in them. Robert Leighton stresses this when he urges us to become far more acquainted than we are with the mortification of sin, self-denial and love, so that we "may be advanced to greater degrees of purity and conformity with the holiness of God."

Let us remind ourselves that the holiness of God is a terror to evil men, for it is this attribute, expressing itself in just retribution, which consumes them like a fire burning stubble. Today, too many thrust away from themselves the 'unpalatable' truth that God necessarily hates all sin and necessarily separates Himself from sinners. Only on the basis of the great atonement and reconciliation He mercifully accomplished in Christ does He have anything to do with us at all.

On the other hand, it is a source of great comfort to the godly to know that, through the atoning work of Christ, although "God's holiness is unappeasable to sin," yet it is not so "to sinners." (John Duncan). Also, true saints may comfort one another by the knowledge that by His grace God enables them to spend their whole lives striving against sin in order to partake perfectly of His holiness at last.

When we remind ourselves that the holiness of God is an infinite, eternal and unchangeable attribute, let us adore Him. Says John Love: "It is true holiness to honour God above all on account of His matchless holiness . . . seeing [that] in Him alone it resides self-existently, infinitely, eternally and unchangeably." As it reveals to us "God's intrinsic unapproachableness, that is, His majestic transcendence," (Reymond), the only appropriate attitude in His presence is one of adoration. "How wonderful how beautiful, the sight of Thee must be: Thine endless wisdom, boundless power and awful purity."

(d) Justice

The justice of God in Scripture is inseparably connected with His holiness. It is because He is infinitely holy that God must condemn and punish sin. Vindictory justice is an essential attribute. As Robert L Dabney says: "Under God's government, the punishment of every sin is inevitable." Because sin strikes at His holiness, He as a jealous God cannot hold sinners guiltless. (Exodus 25:5, 7).

Neither can He arbitrarily waive the sentence and let sinners go free by

way of a general (or even particular) amnesty. As its moral Governor, He has built just or righteous laws into the very constitution of the universe. All who transgress those laws must inevitably suffer. Hence the banishment from Eden, the Flood, the Babel crisis, the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, the exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, all the calamities that ever sweep over our planet or fall on individual nations and communities, as well as the awful punishment of hell. Deuteronomy 27:14-26 and Galatians 3:10 consign us all by nature to eternal punishment.

Robert Bruce brings the reality of these things near to us when he reminds us that “as man is ingenious to invent new sins to provoke God to wrath,” so on His part “the Lord, being both just and prudent . . . devises new botches and plagues to punish these new sins of men, for the storehouse of the Lord’s judgments can never be emptied.” Were God to open our eyes, we would see this principle at work all around us. Every illness, every epidemic, every catastrophe, every clinic, every hospital and every cemetery shout it loudly in our ears.

Yet we must not imagine that God delights in making sinners suffer. Before his intellectual conversion to Christianity C. S. Lewis regarded God as a “Cosmic Sadist,” [his own words]. As Herman Witsius explains: “Penal evil, as such, is not in itself desirable, even to God, because it is connected with the destruction of His own work.” Passages such as Deuteronomy 28:36 and Isaiah 1:24, he continues, simply remind us that by inflicting punishment, God “preserves inviolable the glory of His supremacy, holiness and justice, which sin would wholly obscure Since then it is necessary that God should prefer the destruction of His depraved creature to that of His own glory, it is as necessary that He should punish the wicked . . . God indeed loves His creatures, but . . . Himself much more.”

How thankful we should be that God “not only punishes the godless according to His justice.” (Herman Bavinck). Amazingly Scripture teaches that according to this same justice He grants salvation to His people. He is “a just God and a Saviour.” (Isaiah 45:21). By punishing His own dear Son in their place He vindicates the essential righteousness of His nature and government, besides opening the floodgates of mercy to hell-deserving sinners. The whole argument of Paul’s Letter to the Romans is founded on this principle. That argument is this: God is just. All are sinners. Therefore all are guilty; i.e., liable to condemnation.

Therefore no-one can satisfy divine justice by works. But what we cannot do, Christ in our nature has done. By bringing in an everlasting righteousness, He has satisfied the justice of God according to law. Therefore all who renounce their own righteousness and trust only in that of Christ are justified and saved. This is solemnly glorious. God has so much love to His justice, and is so impartial in its administration, that when our Saviour Christ became our Surety Substitute, God did not spare Him, but delivered Him up for us all.

Here it is important to remind ourselves that the wrath of God that reflects His just anger against sin does not originate in His will. Were this the case, “the same will of God might set it aside or depart from it without satisfaction or pacification - without appeasement or atonement at all. But it originates from the divine nature, and that necessarily. On the supposition of sin, the divine nature, and particularly the divine holiness, assumes necessarily the aspect of wrath.” (Hugh Martin).

So then, “the Bible constantly represents God as a righteous ruler and a just judge. . . . All His laws are holy, just and good. In His moral government He faithfully adheres to those laws. He is impartial and uniform in their execution.” (Charles Hodge). In His rectoral justice He imposes on us righteous laws and executes them impartially, and by His distributive justice He renders to everyone their just reward or punishment.

We shall do well to keep these two branches of God’s justice before our minds. It will be a mark of grace on us that we desire no change to be made in God’s holy law to fit our rebellious hearts, but rather that our rebellious hearts may be changed to fit its inflexible and righteous demands. Such a spirit in us would greatly contribute to us giving our cordial consent to “the reward of eternal life for righteousness” and “the penalty of eternal anguish for evil doing.” (Dabney). “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25).

J. Gresham Machen solemnly reminds us that “at the heart of everything the Bible says are two great truths: the majesty of the law of God, and sin as an offence against that law.” He goes on to specify the only safeguard against tyranny of every kind; namely, the rediscovery of that law.

Consequently we must get rid of the notion that laws and judges exist merely to protect society or to rehabilitate criminals, and we must re-

instate the truth that they exist to execute justice. Charles Hodge explains why this is so and why sin must be punished. It is, he says, because punishment is not chastisement. Chastisement is to benefit the offender; it terminates on man.

By contrast, punishment is inflicted to satisfy justice, and so terminates on God. This is why in Scripture the punishment of evil men and women springs from the wrath of God, while the chastisement of His people is administered in love.

Significantly, the motto of the late Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls, was *Fiat Justitia* (Let there Be Justice). His entire judicial life was spent in pursuit of this end. So, concludes Gresham Machen, “Justice must be done — abstract, holy, transcendent justice. . . . God the Lawgiver; man the subject. God the ruler, man the ruled. The service according to this law is perfect freedom.”

Finally, let us remind ourselves that while a sense of the justice of God acts as a deterrent to His enemies from doing evil, it is a sure mark of a godly man “to do justly.” (Micah 6:8). When integrity and uprightness preserve us, we shall in our own small measure reflect something of the justice of God.

(e) Goodness

Some Reformed theologians view the goodness of God as that transcendent quality by which He is all that He should be, bearing the name ‘God’. It is in this sense that Jesus said: “None is good, save one, even God.” (Mark 10:18). So Charnock emphasizes that “God is good, as He is God; and therefore good by Himself and from Himself . . . He is not first God, and then afterwards good; but He is good as He is God.”

Augustine dwells long and lovingly on this aspect of God as the highest good, both for Himself and for His creatures. And it is because no higher good can be found than Himself, He represents Himself as the fountain of all good to us. “For with Thee is the fountain of life.” (Psalm 36:9). Everything good that we enjoy flows to us from this inexhaustible fountain. “The Lord is good to all.” (Psalm 145:9). This is why Calvin is so fond of the fountain image in speaking of God. So, concludes Thomas Watson, “God is essentially good in Himself and relatively good to us.”

Yet it is customary also to view the goodness of God as a generic feature which embraces His benevolence, His kindness, His love, His grace, His

pity, His patience, His compassion and His mercy. Such passages as Exodus 33:19 and 34:6-7; Psalms 103, 104 and 107; Acts 14:17 and Micah 7:18-19 support this understanding. It is in this sense that the Westminster divines see it in their *Westminster Shorter Catechism* statement. Clearly they intended these other attributes to be contained in it. So the representative Thomas Watson says: “The next attribute is God’s goodness *or* mercy. Mercy is the result and effect of God’s goodness.” He then cites Psalm 33:5 as proof: “The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.” It is, therefore, “that perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures.” (Louis Berkhof). As such it “underscores His condescendence toward His creation.” (Reymond).

Charles Hodge’s summary statement encapsulates this aspect of God’s goodness. “Goodness,” he says, “in the Scriptural sense of the term, includes benevolence, love, mercy and grace. By benevolence is meant the disposition to promote happiness; all sensitive creatures are its objects. Love includes complacency, desire and delight; and has rational beings for its objects. Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable, and includes pity, compassion, forbearance and gentleness, which the Scriptures so abundantly ascribe to God. Grace is love exercised towards the unworthy. The love of a holy God to sinners is the most mysterious attribute of the divine nature.”

Many summary statements exist in the writings of Protestant divines give us an idea of the complexity of this attribute as we conceive it, though in God it is an aspect of His essential simplicity: “God is original, undervived and independent goodness.” (Thomas Boston); “Divine goodness is self-caused, infinite, perfect and eternal.” (A.W. Tozer); “God may as soon cease to be God as cease to be good.” (William Dyer). “God is kind to the unkind, good to the evil, just to the unjust.” (Henry Smith).

Scripture itself states majestically: “Thou art good, and dost good.” (Psalm 119:68). Fittingly Tozer reminds us that “the ground of all blessedness is the goodness of God,” while John Duncan, in a characteristic turn of mind, exclaims: “How good God is! He bids everybody love me!”

When we consider that God’s goodness is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, we must remember for our comfort that God has never been kinder to us than He is now, nor will He ever be less kind to us. Let

us then cleave wisely to the goodness of God, revealed both in His ordinary providence and in His dear Son, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Within the parameters of this course it is not possible to deal with all the ramifications of God's goodness. Suffice it to say that:

(i) God's *love*, both of benevolence and of delight, are manifestations of His goodness, especially in that crowning act of goodness, the giving up of His own Son. (John 3:16).

Yet this amazing perfection is distinctly revealed for our contemplation, delight and filial obedience. "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." (1 John 4:16). Love is therefore to be viewed as an essential attribute in God, and not merely as an aspect of His goodness.

Here again Reformed writers have much to say on this glorious attribute: "God's love is holy, pitiful love." (Jonathan Ranken Anderson); "Whom He loves from eternity, He loves to eternity, and they are believers." (William Dyer); "Not as the world loves does God love." (Thomas White); "If God loved only the worthy He would love only Himself." (David Clarkson); "God loves the lowest saint with a higher love than the highest angel can love God." (Thomas Manton); "God's love is redeeming love, calling love, justifying love, adopting love, sanctifying love, glorifying love." (And, we must add, electing love.) (William Dyer).

Yet, when they have said all, we must conclude with the church father Basil that "the love of God cannot be taught." It is better known, believed and felt than expressed. It simply remains, then, for us to heed the humbling counsel of the Puritan Thomas Jacomb: "Return love for love, your drop for God's ocean."

(ii) God's *mercy* is that aspect of His goodness which relieves those in misery of their distress (2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Ephesians 2:4); for "it is the nature of mercy to have pity on misery." (Robert Bruce). So, Thomas Goodwin reminds us, "God is every way merciful – in His nature, purposes and deeds." One wonderful aspect of His mercy is that while "He shows mercy to the full," He "yet remains full of mercy." (William Dyer). Neither must we forget the telling statement of Spurgeon, that "all more than hell is mercy." Let us then be thankful for the least mercy shown to us. Let us trust in Him

and look always to Him, for His mercies are infinite, and He delights in mercy.

(iii) Finally, His *grace* is as inexpressible as His love and mercy. Yet Charles Hodge well defines it as “love exercised towards the unworthy.” As such it is sovereignly bestowed and unmeritedly received. For this reason Jonathan Anderson regards “the brightest gem in the crown of grace” as “sovereignty.”

When we consider that as sinners we have forfeited every claim of right to the least favour from God, and are by nature under His sentence of condemnation, then His grace appears as nothing less than amazing and wondrous. So, exclaims Robert Leighton, “No language of men or angels can express the graciousness of God.” From such texts as Ephesians 1:6-7, 2:7-9 and Titus 2:11, 3:4-7 we may well conclude that the grace of God is the source of all our blessings, both common and saving.

Let us also consider Christ, who is full of grace. “Christ,” says Rutherford, “left the bosom of God, and was clothed with flesh and our nature, that He might be a mass, a sea and boundless river of visible, living and breathing grace, swelling up to not only the highest banks of the habitable world, but the sides also of the heaven of heavens, to over-water men and angels. So that Christ was, as it were, grace speaking (Psalm 45:2; Luke 4:22); grace sighing, weeping, crying out of horror, dying, withering for sinners, living again (Hebrews 2:9; John 3:16; Romans 8:32-33); and is now glorified grace, dropping down, raining floods of grace on His members (Ephesians 4:11-16; John 14:7, 13, 16, 17).” It is by grace, Rutherford continues, that Christ has all His elect engraved like a seal on His heart, and that all their glory as the peers of heaven is to be the “everlasting tenants and freeholders of grace.” Unless we are united to Him by the Holy Spirit and a living faith, all this grace will profit us nothing. Only those of us who believe on Him for eternal life shall receive this gracious inheritance.

Furthermore, when we who believe reflect on ourselves — what we once were, what we are now, and what we in glory shall be — we are constrained to say with Warfield: “Almighty grace can work wonders” and with Edward Blackstock: “O what a gracious God has He been to me!” Let us then seek to live our whole lives to the

praise of His glorious grace.

The Puritan George Swinnock closes us in to the only appointed way to do this when he urges: “Derive grace from the God of all grace through the means of grace.”

(f) Truth

When Holy Scripture describes the Lord as “a God of truth” (Deuteronomy 32:4) and One who is “plenteous in truth” (Psalm 86:15), it usually means two things:

First, that He is truthful. As such He always tells the truth and does not lie or deceive. It is imperative that we grasp this, for the truthfulness of God is the basis for all our faith. Were He not a God of truth, how could we believe Him? His truthfulness is therefore the immediate object of our trust. Whatever He speaks to us in Holy Scripture must be implicitly believed and acted on. “Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established.” (2 Chronicles 20:20).

Second, it implies that “He is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23). This aspect of His character refers particularly to His promises. So Solomon could reflect: “There hath not failed one word of all His good promise.” (1 Kings 8:56). When, therefore, He says that He will subdue our iniquities (Micah 7:19), perfect that which concerns us (Psalm 138:8) and raise us up at the last day (John 6:40, 44, 54), we are not to question His word. God commends His servant Abraham for being fully persuaded that what He had promised He was perfectly able to perform. (Romans 4:21). Indeed, the apostle places special emphasis on this attribute when he says: “in hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.” (Titus 1:2).

A terrible warning is attached to unbelief: “He that believeth not hath made God a liar.” (1 John 5:10). This is one of the most impudent sins against His holy character. When therefore He threatens unbelievers with judgment (John 12:47-48), He will keep His word. “God is as true to His threatenings as to His promises.” (Thomas Watson). Both Scripture and Church History are full of examples. Let us therefore heed the warning of the Puritan Robert Harris: “Believe the God of truth rather than the father of lies.”

Furthermore, we must be men and women of truth. We must both tell the truth, always and everywhere, whatever it may cost us; and we must be

faithful to our promises and our threats. It is a mark of the godly man that he speaks the truth in his heart. (Psalm 15:2). The liar therefore is diametrically opposed to the God of truth, and is sure to suffer the same punishment as the father of lies.

Let us, in conclusion, trust God with all our heart. His Word is no lie. His character is incomparably faithful. May we seek and find that faith which, says Hugh Binning, is “the soul’s testimony to God’s truth.” “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths.” (Proverbs 3:5-6). As Isaac Watts says: “None shall find His promise vain.”

Conclusion

Holy Scripture draws three necessary inferences from the attributes of God:

1. *That He is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably blessed.* So Daniel exclaims in holy wonder: “Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are His.” (Daniel 2:20). One who possesses such glorious perfections is inevitably blessed.

2. *That He is absolutely sovereign.* “The Lord reigneth: He is clothed with majesty.” (Psalm 93:1). He who possesses absolute power, wisdom, justice, mercy, etc necessarily has the right and authority to dispose of all His creatures just as He pleases, without being accountable to any. Therefore He may, says Zanchius truly, “with the strictest holiness and justice, love or hate, elect or reprobate, save or destroy any of His creatures, whether human or angelic, according to His own free pleasure and sovereign purpose.”

3. *That He is ineffably glorious.* “He was in Himself,” says John Owen, “no less infinitely and eternally glorious before the creation of all or anything whatever, than He will be when He shall be encompassed about with the praises of all the works of His hands. And such is His absolute perfection that no honour given unto Him, no admiration of Him, no ascription of glory and praise, can add anything unto Him.” Accordingly David Dickson urges us to consider that there is in God such a “wonderful beauty and comeliness, a splendour of glory, and a shining majesty to be seen” that we should deliberately take notice of it and speak about it “to the edification of others.” “The mystery of the glory of God,” he

says elsewhere, is such that he who sees it “cannot but be ravished” with the sight. Yet “none,” he concludes, “can sufficiently comprehend it or take it up fully, save God Himself.” There we may safely rest.



ASSIGNMENTS

Test Yourself!

1. “The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him — and of her” (A.W. Tozer). Discuss.

2. Write down ONE passage from the Psalms and ONE from hymns which refer to EACH of the following:

- (a) Some of God’s attributes collectively.
- (b) God’s holiness.
- (c) God’s grace.
- (d) God’s sovereignty.

3. State, giving one Biblical reference for each, how Christ reveals the divine attributes of:

- (a) omnipresence.
- (b) omniscience.
- (c) omnipotence.
- (d) holiness.
- (e) mercy.
- (f) righteous anger or wrath.

4. Quote relevant Scriptures to prove that God:

- (a) Always speaks the truth.

(b) Will assuredly fulfil both His promises and His threats.

(c) Will faithfully reward the proud who do not believe and trust Him.



3. The Knowledge of God through the Knowledge of His Names and Tri-une Personality

Since the basis of our saving knowledge of God is His own self-revelation in Holy Scripture, we remind ourselves that God wishes Himself to be known by man, and that He does so by revealing some *names* by which He wishes to be known. Some of these are true names; others are title-descriptions; still others are metaphors.

Secondly, while the term *Trinity* is not found in Scripture, God certainly reveals Himself there as a *tri-personal* God. Despite numerous attempts to find trinitarian analogies in nature (especially by Augustine, whose imagination runs riot in the quest), the knowledge of God as Tri-une comes to us exclusively from His Word. It is pre-eminently therefore a doctrine of special revelation.

A. The Names of God

Out of a profound sense of His brutish ignorance of God, the godly Agur asks: “What is His name, and what is His Son’s name, if thou canst tell?” (Proverbs 30:4). Once more we stand on the brink of that awesome abyss which would be death for us to fall into. “How can we express Him in words, or conceive of Him in thought?” asks Charles Bridges with astonishment. So we must restrain our curiosity, lay our hand on our mouth, and be still, seeking only to know that He is God. There are depths in God’s name and names that only He whose understanding is infinite can know. Yet we must attempt some understanding, since God has graciously provided the data for us to do so.

When Scripture speaks of God’s name (singular), it signifies His whole Being. The following statements are relevant: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” (Exodus 20:7). “How excellent is thy name in all the earth.” (Psalm 8:1). “As is thy name, O God, so is thy praise.” (Psalm 48:10).

When it supplies us with God’s names (plural), it aims to convey the many-sided facets of His nature and character. Let us never forget that these names were not invented by man, but are given Himself by God. Even those that are anthropomorphic (that is, couched in terms of human form and character) are never the work of apostles and prophets seeking to form God in our image, but always the fruit of God condescending to communicate with us in an intelligible way. Though He Himself is

infinitely beyond us, the language of self-communication He uses was deliberately devised by Him for our understanding.

Even then, as Berkhof notes, “the names of God constitute a difficulty for human thought.” Each one of them is specially designed to impress on us the two facts that:

- (1) God is infinitely exalted above us; therefore it strains all our grace-aided powers to grasp the particular facet of His nature that each name symbolizes;
- (2) He nevertheless wishes us to know Him as He really is and commune with Him as our God. Like Himself, therefore, God’s names are both transcendent and immanent.

(a) Old Testament Names

The name *El* and its compounds point to God as the only strong and mighty Lord, highly exalted above every created power and idol. The Puritan William Gouge even suggests that the name *Elohim* indicates “a plurality of persons in a unity of nature,” though others view it as expressing a plurality of power.

The name *Adonai*, usually translated ‘Lord’, signifies God as sovereign Ruler and Judge.

The name *Jehovah* signifies “a boundless, ineffable, absolute and transcendent being.” (Hugh Binning). It refers, he continues, to “God’s unsearchableness, God’s unchangeableness and God’s absoluteness: His ineffability, His eternity, and His sovereignty and independent subsistence, upon whom all other things depend.” Its appearance in Exodus 3:14 points to God as the self-existent One. Further Biblical uses show God’s graciousness in entering into covenant relations with His chosen people. In short, the name *Jehovah* is the great covenant name of God. It has various compounds.

The Jews regarded this name (in Hebrew, *JHWH* or *YHWH* nowadays) as too sacred to pronounce, and so in speaking and reading substituted for it the vowels of the name *Adonai*. Hence the very frequent appearance in the Authorised Version (King James Version) of the word ‘Lord.’ For example, in quoting Psalm 110.1, our Lord, instead of saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, might have said, *Jehovah* (or *Yahweh*) said unto *Adonai*. (Matthew 22:44).

Shaddai and *El-Shaddai* point to God as the omnipotent One who makes the whole creation serve His purpose of grace.

The great Princeton scholar, Robert Dick Wilson, once counted the number of appearances of each Old Testament name of God in the Pentateuch. Significantly the name *Jehovah* (used in Wilson's day) appears 1,743 times and *Elohim* 278 times. None of the other names occurs more than 15 times. This indicates how God chiefly wishes Himself to be known, and proves the contention that His Old Testament self-disclosure is made to serve His purpose of grace and salvation.

Notice the significance of this truth in the case of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. He says: "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name." (Genesis 32:29). Similarly, Christ prophetically promises: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren." (Psalm 22:22), and confesses His initial fulfillment of this promise: "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me." (John 17:6). In these references, the name of God stands for His whole character as Redeemer. This too shows the overwhelming importance of the name *Jehovah* (or *Yahweh*).

(b) New Testament Names

Theos denotes the one true God to distinguish Him from all the idols of the heathen. In the Septuagint, observes Vine, with few exceptions *theos* "translates the Hebrew words *Elohim* and *Jehovah*, the former indicating His power and pre-eminence, the latter His unoriginated, immutable, eternal and self-sustained existence."

Kurios signifies the Lord who has absolute authority and power.

Pater means simply 'Father.' It usually refers to "God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity." (Richard A. Muller). As the Puritan Robert Harris remarks: "God is a common Father to all by office, a special Father to saints by adoption, and a singular Father to Christ by nature."

Clearly, "no single name can express the whole nature of God." (Basil). Even if it could, its content would be inexhaustible, and so incomprehensible to us. We are therefore to view God through the window of each name as intimating a particular relationship to His creation in general and to His people in particular.

Such title-descriptions as *King of kings* and *Lord of lords* and metaphors as *Rock* and *Refuge* clearly convey to us both God's exalted nature and status, and His relationship to His people, while the anthropomorphisms

which depict God as ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’, ‘working’, ‘resting’, etc, are deliberate points of contact with us whom He created in His own image. As such they form the basis of some slight understanding of His Being and ways.

B. The Tri-une Personality of God

The Holy Trinity, says Wilhelmus à Brakel truly, is “the mystery of mysteries.” That is, it is even more mysterious than either the union of two natures in the Person of Christ, or the union of Christ and His Church, or the inscrutable mystery of regeneration.

Nevertheless, it is a mystery that has been revealed. “Even more richly than in His names and attributes, God has revealed Himself in His Word as the Triune God.” (G.H. Kersten).

Because the supreme aim of Holy Scripture is to reveal God in order for us to know, glorify and enjoy Him as our God, it would be profane on our part to treat the Trinity merely as a subject of investigation. John Owen points us to the only right approach in his treatise on *Communion with God*. This approach emphasizes our union and communion with each person of the Godhead.

Owing to the infinite disparity between God and us, both as creatures and as sinners, our knowledge of and communion with God is hidden in Christ. Consequently “it is too wonderful for sinful human nature to discover.” (John Owen). This is why without Christ we can neither know God as Tri-une nor enter His presence without dread. It should be our chief aim, therefore, to be united to God in Christ and enjoy actual communion with Him.

In view of this, we shall aim to studiously avoid all speculation and even a merely intellectual study of the Trinity. All our learning needs to be sanctified. Unsanctified learning is the bane of the ministry. To succeed in this aim we need the light and protection of the Holy Spirit Himself. We can have no more knowledge of God as Tri-une than the Spirit is pleased to give us. This is a very humbling admission, and our proud nature hates it. Yet it is true. Let us therefore cry for understanding and guidance as we study.

(1) The Doctrine of the Trinity

Despite the inability of reason to comprehend the Tri-une God, certain

truths about His trinitarian Being are clear in Holy Scripture.

Briefly formulated, the doctrine of the Trinity is that:

A. There is only one living and true God. “The Lord our God is one Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:4) is a postulate of all religion, both natural and revealed. “God is one.” (Galatians 3:20). “For though there be that are called gods, . . . to us there is but one God.” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

B. This one God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is, God has a three-fold manner of Being which does not express His different relationships to us creatures, but which is inherent in Himself. Neither must we imagine the three ‘persons’ of the Godhead as existing side by side. God does not consist *of* three Persons, but exists *in* three Persons. As Heber’s superb trinitarian hymn says: “God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity.”

(2) *Scriptural Proof for the Doctrine of the Trinity*

A. The plural form *Elohim* certainly indicates a plurality of persons. “And God said, Let us make man.” (Genesis 1:26). “The man is become as one of us.” (Genesis 3:22). “Let us go down and there confound their language.” (Genesis 11:7). “Remember now thy Creator(s).” (Ecclesiastes 12:1). “Thy Maker(s) are thy Husband(s).” (Isaiah 54:5).

B. Three persons are distinctly adumbrated together in certain passages. “The Lord God and His Spirit (plural) hath (singular) sent Me.” (Isaiah 48:16). Here the context is clearly Messianic. The so-called Johannine comma affords another example: “For there are three that bear record in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one.” (1 John 5:7). Comments Charles Forster: “The only Scripture in which the idea of . . . ‘The Three-One’ is categorically expressed, is 1 John 5:7.” Both the Great Commission and the Apostolic Blessing are couched in trinitarian terms: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” (Matthew 28:19). “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

C. The three-fold form of the ancient priestly blessing hints at the plurality of persons in the Godhead. “The Lord bless thee and keep thee: the Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26). So does the trisagion: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:3).

D. The three persons are revealed separately. “The Lord (i.e., the Father) said unto my Lord (ie the Son), Sit thou at my right hand.” (Psalm 110:1). “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” (Isaiah 61:1). “But they rebelled, and vexed His Holy Spirit.” (Isaiah 63:10).

E. Each of the three persons reveals Himself with a distinct name. The term ‘Father’ (as an inherent property) is not applied to the Son, nor is the term ‘Son’ applied to the Spirit.

F. Each of the three persons is given throughout Scripture divine names, attributes, worship and works. Scripture proofs abound.

G. Nevertheless, they are presented as inherent in each other. “I am in the Father, and the Father [is] in me.” (John 14:11). This truth safeguards us against several heresies. The three Persons, says James Packer, “are not three roles played by one person (that is *modalism*), nor are they three gods in a cluster (that is *tritheism*).” They are literally *three in one*. Only where this tri-une God is confessed according to Holy Scripture can the true and living God be known. As the *Athanasian Creed* confesses: “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor separating the substance.” Despite such attempts at clarification, Hugh Binning is right to ask rhetorically: “Can you conceive that unity of the Trinity? Can you imagine that reciprocal inhabitation, that mutual communion? . . . No. It hath not entered into the heart to conceive it. Only this much we know, that it is most perfect, it is most glorious.”

One of the finest summaries of the doctrine is afforded by James Durham, who writes: “As there is but one God essentially, so there are three distinct, co-equal, co-essential and consubstantial persons of that blessed Godhead—the Father, Son and Spirit; who yet in a most wonderful, excellent and infinitely perfect though an inconceivable manner, have an order of subsisting and working among themselves.”

(3) *The Term 'Persons'*

Why they are called 'persons' is explained by Jonathan Edwards: "Though the word 'person' be rarely used in the Scriptures, yet I believe that we have no word in the English language that does so naturally represent what the Scripture reveals of the distinction of the Eternal Three—Father, Son and Holy Ghost—as to say they are one God but three persons."

Calvin continues our exposition: "By person . . . I mean a subsistence in the divine essence—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties."

(4) *The Properties of Each Person in the Godhead*

While they are equal in substance, power and glory, each person nevertheless possesses distinct properties that differentiate Him from the others.

Charles Hodge summarizes these in the following succinct way:

"(a) the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit third; (b) the Son is of the Father, and the Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; (c) the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit; (d) the Father operates through the Son, and the Father and Son operate through the Spirit." Thus the Father is often revealed to us as the Fountain of the Godhead, the Son as existing from the Father by eternal generation, and the Spirit as eternally proceeding from both. This is utterly incomprehensible to us, but true. As the *Belgic Confession* (1561) says: "The Father has never been without His Son, nor without His Holy Spirit." Nowhere in Holy Scripture may the converse of these statements be found.

The personal properties of *the Father* are:

(1) that He is of Himself and subsists by Himself. John Pearson explains: "In the very name of *Father* there is something of eminence which is not in that of *Son*; and some kind of priority we must ascribe unto Him whom we call the first."

(2) that He eternally generates the Son. That priority, Pearson continues, consists not in the essence or attributes of the Father being greater than the essence or attributes of the Son, but "that the Father hath that essence of Himself, the Son by communication

from the Father.” For this reason the Son acknowledges that He is “from the Father”, that He “lives by the Father”, that the Father “gave Him to have life in Himself.” (John 7:29; 6:57; 5:26). We observe too that the Son refers all things to the Father, as being received from Him.

On John 5:26 — “For as the Father hath life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.” George Hutcheson comments: “Christ, as God, hath a fountain of life equal with the Father, communicated to Him from the Father by eternal generation.” This does not imply inferiority or generation in time, for the Father communicates His whole nature to the Son eternally.

As the Eternal Generation of *the Son* is taught by the foregoing texts, so His Deity is taught in such passages as John 17:5—“And now, O Father, glorify Thou me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.”; Colossians 2:9—“For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”; John 8:58—“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I AM.” Indeed, at least twelve New Testament references refer to Christ as Jehovah. (Compare Revelation 17:14 with Deuteronomy 10:17; Romans 10:13 with Joel 2:32; John 12:40-41 with Isaiah 6:1-3.) Especially notable in the Old Testament is Jeremiah 23:6, where He is called *Jehovah Tsidkenu* (*Jehovah our Righteousness*).

Furthermore, the Son is given the names (Acts 20:28; Romans 9:5), the attributes (Proverbs 8:22; John 1:1), the works (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) and the worship (Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:13) of God.

The Deity and Procession of *the Holy Spirit* are also clear from Holy Scripture. In Acts 5:3-4 He is expressly called God. In Hebrews 9:14 and Psalm 139:7-8 He is given the attributes of God. In John 3:5 and 1 Corinthians 2:11 He is said to do the works of God. In Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 He is given the honour and worship of God.

The Holy Spirit’s distinctive property is that He proceeds from both the Father and the Son. As it is utterly beyond our grasp, the difference between the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit cannot be comprehended. It is sufficient for us to note that the Word of God clearly indicates a difference. If the Son is generated by the Father (Psalm 2:7), the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 15:26; Galatians 4:6). While these texts refer in context to the Spirit

being sent, they clearly imply His eternal procession.

As far as words are able to impart light, Jonathan Edwards explains that the phrase ‘the procession of the Spirit’ means that “the Holy Spirit does in some ineffable and inconceivable manner proceed, and is breathed forth both from the Father and the Son, by the divine essence being wholly poured and flowing out in that infinitely intense, holy and pure love and delight that continually and unchangeable breathes forth from the Father and the Son, primarily towards each other, and secondarily towards the creature, and so flowing forth in a different subsistence or person in a manner to us utterly inexplicable and inconceivable, and . . . this is that person that is poured forth into the hearts of angels and saints.”

A bitter controversy arose in the sixth century between the Eastern and Western branches of the Church over the Spirit’s procession. The former claimed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *by* the Son, but not *from* the Son. This view presents the Son as inferior to the Father. The latter taught that He proceeds from both. Hence the inclusion of the *filioque* clause (i.e., ‘and from the Son’) in the Western version of the Nicene Creed.

Other disputes involved the *Personality* of the Spirit. It is clear, however, that a Spirit who speaks (Acts 13:2), who indites Scripture (Acts 15:28) and who intercedes (Romans 8:26-27), to mention no more characteristics, is a divine Person.

(5) Practical Considerations

One thing is certain from all these references: the holy and blessed Trinity is utterly inconceivable and incomprehensible to us. Yet the practical importance of the doctrine of the Trinity requires us first to “believe this doctrine of the Trinity of Persons in the unity of essence.” (Thomas Watson). This is because the Trinity is purely the object of revelation, and so of faith. Reason cannot plumb the depths of this mystery. But “where reason cannot wade, there faith may swim.” (Thomas Watson). So we are to believe in the Lord our God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “Behold,” says à Brakel, “must you not admit that faith in the Holy Trinity is profitable? Is it not the only foundation of a truly godly life and the fountain of all comfort?”

Secondly, we are to equally honour and adore “all three persons in the unity of their gracious ministry to us.” (James I. Packer). In this ministry

the three divine persons are often referred to as the economic trinity. This means that they have divided the great work of our salvation among themselves. Malcolm MacSween puts the matter succinctly when he says: “Sinners are saved by the grace of God. This grace is in the Godhead. The grace of the Father consists in planning salvation, the grace of the Son in procuring salvation, and the grace of the Spirit in applying salvation.” This is the testimony both of Scripture and of all Reformed writers. Therefore we should observe the work of each divine person in the planning, accomplishing and applying our redemption.

The Biblical doctrine also demands the rejection of all unitarian or non-trinitarian religions as false. These include all the non-Christian world religions as well as such cults as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians and Unitarians, which represent a resurgence of the ancient heresies of Arianism and Socinianism.

Furthermore, we should seek particular communion with each person of the Godhead. Says John Owen: “Faith, love, trust, joy and obedience are the saints’ responses to the Father’s loving acts shown to them. . . . Faith, hope and love, expressed in obedience and worship, are especially due to the Son of God from the saints. . . . All worship is due also to the Holy Spirit, as He is God and as He is the Spirit of grace.” And so he concludes: “There is no exercise of grace towards God, no act of divine worship given to Him, no duty or obedience done for Him, but they are distinctly directed to the Father, Son and Spirit.”

While this is true, we must never forget the qualification offered by James Durham: “Although there be three persons of the glorious Godhead, and all are to be worshipped; yet there are not three objects of worship, but one; nor three kinds of worship . . . From which it followeth that the mind of the worshipper is not to be distracted in seeking to comprehend or order in his thoughts three distinct persons as three distinct objects of worship; but to conceive reverently of one infinite God, who is three persons.” This is sane and wise counsel. May we lay it to heart.



ASSIGNMENTS

Test Yourself!

1. Summarize in your own words the Old Testament doctrine of the Trinity.

2. Write a paragraph on ONE Old Testament *and* ONE New Testament name of God.



From His Fullness Ministries: ST Module 2 (Doctrine of God)
(www.fromhisfullness.com)

4. The Knowledge of God through the Knowledge of His Decree

God has repeatedly revealed Himself as a purposing God, whose will planned and plotted the entire course of time, space and history according to His eternal decree. The present module considers this decree as a revealed means of knowing more of God.

(1) The Decree in General

In Ephesians 1:11 we are told that God is working all things according to the counsel of His own will. This counsel refers to His eternal purpose by which, for His own glory, God has fore-ordained whatever comes to pass. Stated another way, “From all eternity God has purposed to do just exactly what He is doing.” (Lorraine Boettner). The scope of this purpose is vast, and includes creation, providence and redemption. The whole scheme lies in the mind and will of God as one simple, all-embracing purpose. Hence our use of the term *decree* rather than decrees.

The topic of the decree appears within the doctrine of God because it is an operation of the Godhead. While it does not affect the properties of the divine persons in relation to each other, it expresses the divine will in relation to everything outside the Godhead. Explains Shedd: “God the Father did not decree the generation of the Son, nor did the Father and the Son decree the spiration of the Holy Spirit. The tri-une God could no more decide . . . to be tri-une than He could decide . . . to be omnipotent or omniscient. The divine decree consequently comprehends only those events that occur in time.”

This decree does not make God the author of sin. Scripture expressly says that “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all,” (1 John 1:5), and that He can neither tempt nor be tempted with evil. (James 1:13). Says Zanchius: “No-one can deny that God permits sin, but He permits it neither ignorantly nor unwillingly . . . However, it should be carefully noticed (1) that God’s permission of sin does not arise from His taking delight in it; on the contrary, sin, as sin, is the abominable thing that His soul hates, and His efficacious permission of it is for wise and good purposes; (2) that God’s free and voluntary permission of sin lays no man under any forcible or compulsive necessity of committing it.”

In this connection Charles Hodge reminds us that “theology is not philosophy.” It does not presume either to discover truth or to reconcile truths that God has revealed. It simply states what God says in His Word and vindicates its statements against unbelieving criticism. This humble

role is particularly necessary in connection with the decree of God. We must be very careful not to give the faintest hint that God is responsible for sin. We should rest content with the fine statement of Thomas Watson on this subject. He says: "God has a hand in the action in which sin is, but not in the sin of the action." This explanation vindicates God from every charge of complicity in sin, at the same time acknowledging His minute providential control.

Neither does the decree violate the will of sinful men and devils. We sin because we want to sin, and we do not come to Christ because we will not. God's sovereign decree does not eradicate our responsibility, nor compel us to believe or not believe. Faith will be satisfied to know that while God is sovereign, man is a free agent. What appears to be opposed in Scripture, let us not try to reconcile. As Spurgeon says, friends do not need to be reconciled.

(2) The Decretive and Preceptive Will of God

At this point it is appropriate to introduce the Biblical distinction between the decretive and the preceptive will of God.

"By God's decretive will we mean that will by which He fore-ordains whatever comes to pass. By His preceptive [will], that by which He enjoins on creatures what is right and proper for them to do. The decretive [will] we also call His secret will: because it is for the most part . . . retained in His own breast. His preceptive [will] we call His revealed will, because it is published to man for His guidance." (Robert L. Dabney).

We must understand that God's decretive will and His preceptive will are never in conflict. He may decree to permit what He forbids, but He never decrees to force others to do what He forbids. He permits men to sin, but He always and everywhere forbids them to sin. By confusing these two aspects of the will of God men have brought themselves into inextricable confusion. Yet Holy Scripture clearly distinguishes them, and forbids us to meddle with one of them: "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 29:29). We must never forget that we are prohibited from prying into any of God's secrets, but we are to take God's precepts for our perfect rule of right and wrong.

Having mentioned these caveats, we repeat the truth that by His eternal decree God has fore-ordained whatever comes to pass. To this fore-ordination there is no exception. Such apparently accidental events as the fall of a sparrow, the sting of a wasp, a ‘chance’ meeting of two persons and the throw of a dice are all embraced by His decree. God’s purpose recognizes neither fate nor chance. Even the sinful actions of men and devils are therefore within the scope of God’s fore-ordination. Indeed, the most dreadful sin ever committed, the crucifixion of our Lord and Saviour, lay under God’s “determinate counsel and foreknowledge.” (Acts 2:23).

Various terms are used in Scripture to denote the decree of God. In Psalm 2:7 Christ calls it “the decree.” In Isaiah 46:10 God calls it “my counsel.” In Romans 8:28 Paul calls it God’s “purpose.” In Ephesians 1:9 he calls it God’s “good pleasure.” In Job 23:14 the patriarch calls it that which is “appointed.” In Acts 4:28 the early believers call it God’s “counsel determined before.”

(3) Distinctive Features of the Decree of God

First, it is sovereign. As God Himself is sovereign, so His decree is also sovereign. That is, He determines whatever comes to pass because it pleases Him. In answer, therefore, to the questions: “Why did God create the universe? Why does He continue to uphold and control it? Why has He permitted the existence of sin? Why did He redeem man instead of angels? Why do some believe while others do not?” the Scriptures and Reformed theologians reply: “Because it pleased Him.” Revelation 4:11 makes this the very reason for the heavenly worship of God: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power, for Thou hast created all things, and *for Thy pleasure* they are and were created.” James Durham paraphrases this reason in the following way: “Not only were all things created by Thee, but when there was no tie upon Thee to make them, Thou of Thy good pleasure thought fit to do so . . . in which there was no other motive, end, or rule in proceeding, but Thy own pleasure and the setting forth of Thy own glory.”

Proverbs 16:4 is more specific: “The Lord hath made all things for Himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” Here is not only a clear assertion of the absolute good pleasure of God as the source of creation, but also a definite reason for creating the wicked: it is, says Durham, “for the glorifying of His name.”

The sovereignty of God's decree is asserted too in the following passages: "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? . . . Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand." (Jeremiah 18:6. See also Romans 9:20-21). "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." (Matthew 11:26).

The majestic nature of God's sovereignty is awesomely captured in Daniel 4:35—"He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou." Comments Calvin: "God is a law to Himself, because His will is the most perfect justice." We must therefore be content with His all-powerful control, he continues, and "cease to cavil against God and oppose our reason to His secret counsels." Citing Psalm 115:3—"But our God is in the heavens: He hath done whatsoever He hath pleased," he says: "From this sentence we gather that nothing happens by chance, but every event in the world depends on God's secret providence."

Secondly, the decree is eternal. That is, it took place in eternity. "With one act of His will He has determined from all eternity all things that shall or shall not be." (G.H Kersten). So we read that "known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world." (Acts 15:18). J.A. Alexander paraphrases this as: "known (to Himself as part of His own plan or purpose) from eternity." Ephesians 1:4 states the same truth: "According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world." True, the component parts of the decree unfold in time, but the decree itself has no succession of time. It is eternal.

A simple illustration may throw light on this. Suppose six cars appear round a corner in succession. To an observer standing at their level the cars would be seen as following each other. This is how the decree of God unfolds before our eyes. However, an observer standing on a mountain summit above them sees all six cars simultaneously. This is how the omniscient mind of God sees everything He has ordained in one eternal glance.

In the light of this, we must resist every tendency to imagine that God arranges His decree according to the limited, temporal view of man. While everything decreed appears in succession on the road of history, there is no succession in the decree itself.

Thirdly, the decree is unchangeable. As God suffers no change in Himself, so His decree suffers none. “The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever.” (Psalm 33:11). “For the Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it?” (Isaiah 14:27). “For who hath resisted His will?” (Romans 9:19). As B. B. Warfield reminds us, because His decree is unchangeable, God, not man, is everywhere and at all times in control. Being unchangeable, it is necessarily irresistible. So, says Rutherford, “it is easier to complain of the decree than to change it.” May we be convinced that whenever Scripture speaks of God changing or repenting, it is not He and His decree that change, but His actions, all of which are enfolded within His one, unchangeable purpose.

Fourthly, God’s decree is unconditional. It does not depend on any condition to be performed by man before it can be executed. True, God has stipulated certain conditions that must be performed for the execution of His will, but He Himself works these conditions. For example, sinners must repent and believe before they can be saved. But Scripture says expressly that God grants repentance and gives faith to those who shall be saved. As the sovereign God, He has decreed whatever pleases Him, and whatever He decrees He performs. His decree is therefore unconditional.

The decree of God calls us to the deepest self-abasement, for no-one can stay His hand or say to Him: “What doest Thou?” May we seek the grace given to such saints as Job, Aaron, Eli and David, who all laid their hands on their mouths when God smote them contrary to their natural desires. Whenever He thwarts our will, may we cry to Him as Job did: “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord,” and as His Son did: “Not my will, but thine be done.” For His counsel shall stand, and He will do all His good pleasure. O that men would learn that they are only men, and that the Lord, He is God!

(4) Predestination

In many theological treatises, the Decree of God is termed Predestination. Abraham Kuyper is representative when he writes: “The determination of the existence of all things to be created, or what is to be camellia or buttercup, nightingale or crow, hart or swine, and equally among men, the determination of our own persons, whether one is to be born as boy or girl, rich or poor, dull or clever, white or coloured, or even as Abel and Cain, is the most tremendous predestination conceivable in heaven

or on earth.” This all-embracing predestination, he continues, is not subject to the control of either man or of blind natural forces, but of Almighty God, Creator, Possessor and Ruler of all. May this majestic truth both humble and astonish us.

There is, however, a narrower use of the term. This relates to God’s decree concerning salvation. A. A. Hodge defines predestination as “the counsel of God concerning fallen men, including the sovereign election of some to everlasting life, and the most righteous reprobation of the rest.” To these aspects of the decree we now turn.

(5) Election

The term *election* means that God has set His special love on particular men, women and children in order for them to partake of His great salvation. 1 Peter 1:2 states the doctrine thus: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” This foreknowledge refers to God’s electing love: “In love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” (Ephesians 1:5). As there is election in creation and election in providence, so too there is election in redemption; election in the realm of grace as well as in that of nature. When Paul exclaims of the Son of God: “who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20), he is stating the same glorious truth as experienced in his own redeemed soul. John Love notes what is absolutely unique about this electing love of God: “It was the highest possible love directed to objects worthy of the highest possible hatred.”

The Scriptures abound with references to this doctrine. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he knows their election, that God had appointed them from the beginning not to wrath but to obtain salvation. (1 Thessalonians 1:4; 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul exults in the perfect justification of God’s chosen people: “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect?” (Romans 8:33). Our Lord refers to the elect. (Matthew 24:24, 31; Mark 13:20). So does Peter. (1 Peter 1:2; 2:9; 5:13).

The leading Reformers and Reformed theologians also accepted it. Says Calvin: “We shall never be clearly convinced as we ought to be that our salvation flows from the fountain of God’s free mercy, till we are acquainted with this eternal election, which illustrates the grace of God by this comparison: that He adopts not all promiscuously to the hope of

salvation, but gives to some what He refuses to others.” Adds Luther: “All things whatever arise from and depend on the divine appointment, by which it was fore-ordained who should receive the word of life and who should disbelieve it, who should be delivered from their sins and who should be hardened in them, and who should be justified and who should be condemned.” Says Zanchius: the predestination of the elect is “that eternal, unconditional, particular and irreversible act of the divine will whereby, in matchless love and adorable sovereignty, God determined with Himself to deliver a certain number of Adam’s degenerate offspring out of that sinful and miserable estate into which, by his primitive transgression, they were to fall.”

Note some features of election:

First, election is for the sake of God. “By the decree of God,” states the *Westminster Confession*, “for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated to everlasting life.” When God tells us expressly that He will have mercy on whom He will, it is that His elect will glorify that mercy throughout eternity. So Paul frequently reminds the Ephesians that their election is to the praise of His glorious grace. Who can conceive the glory that will accrue to God throughout eternity from the glorified souls of His people? “The supreme end of this decree,” says Zanchius, “is the manifestation of His own infinitely glorious and amiably tremendous perfections; the inferior or subordinate end is the happiness and salvation of those who are thus freely elected.”

Second, election is in Christ. Says Calvin: “The register in which we are enrolled is our Lord Jesus Christ.” We are “chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.” (Ephesians 1:4). This is why our Lord can say: “I pray not for the world, but for those whom Thou hast given me.” (John 17:9). Many theologians forget that in the scheme of redemption election refers primarily to “Christ the Saviour”, and only then to “those to be saved by Christ. For even Christ was chosen of God, and by an eternal and immutable decree was given to be our Saviour. (1 Peter 1:20). And they whom Christ was to save were given to Him by the same decree. (John 17:6). They are therefore said to be chosen in Christ. (Ephesians 1:4); ie not only by Christ as God, . . . but also in Christ as Mediator.” (Herman Witsius). So, says Witsius elsewhere: “The book of election is called the Lamb’s book of life (Revelation 13:8), not only because life is to be obtained in virtue of the Lamb slain, but also because the Lamb takes up the first page of the book; He is the Head of

the rest of the elect, and the First-born among many brethren and joint-heirs with Him. (Romans 8:29,17).

On the basis of this truth, comments Thomas Manton on our Lord's High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17: "Universal redemption is disproved; for those for whom Christ prayed not, for them He died not." This, he claims, condemns the Arminians, who "divide Christ from election, or election from Christ; as if Christ were to die for those that were never elected." In so doing, they break the links in the chain of salvation. Just as our calling is in Christ, and our justification is in Christ, and our sanctification is in Christ, and our glorification is in Christ, so too our election is in Christ.

Third, election is unconditional. Paul informs Timothy expressly that we are saved "not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." (2 Timothy 1:9). He also tells the Ephesians that God had chosen them, not because He foresaw that they would be holy, but so that they would be holy. (Ephesians 1:4). Indeed, a conditional election is a contradiction. Were God to frame His decree according to faith and good works foreseen, as Warfield reminds us, it would make Him choose those who have already chosen themselves. So, says Augustine: "The elect of God are chosen by Him to be His children in order that they might be made to believe, not because He foresaw that they would believe." Thomas Goodwin says: "God chooses no man for his faith, but unto faith, and through faith." Acts 13.48 — "and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed," — also clearly teaches election to faith. And where election decides our salvation, there can be no preparation for or cooperation with saving grace. Not the least condition stands between God's free choice of His people and their salvation. Election is unconditional.

Fourth, election is particular. True, Scripture does speak of national election. (Amos 3.2; Psalm 147.20; Deuteronomy 7.7-8). It also speaks of vocational election. (John 15.16). But election to eternal life and salvation is individual and particular. "Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated." (Romans 9.13). Comments Malcolm MacSween: "Many attempt to alter the sharpness of the word *hated*. They say it does not mean hated, but that God loved Esau less. They pervert the obvious meaning of the Bible. God chose Jacob, but He did not choose Esau. . . . Others, to blunt the exact meaning, say that it does not refer to Jacob or Esau personally, but to their descendants, the nations of Israel and

Edom. . . but the text in Romans speaks of two individual persons.”

Besides, a universal election is a contradiction in terms. It is out of the mass of fallen, rebellious creatures that God selects His vessels of mercy and trophies of grace. So John writes to “the elect lady and her children.” (2 John 1). So the Psalmist can say in humble confidence: “I am poor and needy, yet the Lord thinketh upon me.” (Psalm 40.17). Here are particular individuals enjoying divine favour. Election is particular.

Fifth, election will be known by its fruits. Says Calvin: “Our election must be as a root that yields good fruits.” For example, he reminds us, “*faith* is a fruit of election.” The sole reason for the difference between us and unbelievers is that according to His eternal, loving purpose “God reached out His hand and drew us to Himself”, even when we had our backs turned against Him. To the question: “How do we know that God has elected us before the creation of the world?” Calvin replies: “By believing in Jesus Christ.” Similarly, the apostle John tells us that “we *love* Him because He first loved us.” (1 John 4.19). So it is with every good fruit we bring forth to God. Says Boettner: “While good works are not the ground of salvation, they are absolutely essential to it as its fruits and evidences.” The man who continues to live in the love and practice of sin, or who is barren and unfruitful in the knowledge of Christ, has no ground to conclude that He is one of God’s elect.

(6) The Decree includes the Means of Salvation

The divine decree includes not only the end God has in mind but all the means working towards that end. This is why Christopher Love attaches so much importance to the inclusion of the *means* of salvation within the decree to save: “In the same decree wherein God intends the final estate of any man, He does as well intend the means towards that end . . . If God intends to save such a man, in the same decree He likewise intends that that man shall have grace, and use those means and perform those duties that are required in a person that shall be saved. The elect of God are predestined by God to be conformed to the image of His Son. (Romans 8.29). God had before ordained that we should walk in good works. (Ephesians 2.10).”

(7) The Decree intends the Assurance of our Election

We may be assured of our election, says Witsius, by honestly reading two books: Scripture and conscience. Scripture gives us the marks of the

elect; namely, they are effectually called by the Word and Spirit of God (Romans 8.30); they place their faith only in God and Christ (2 Thessalonians 2.13); they hate and avoid evil (2 Timothy 2.19); and they sincerely and constantly study holiness (Ephesians 1.4). Conscience then reveals to us whether these things are true of us or not. If true, “the believing soul may, from these undoubted fruits, be assured of his election.”

(8) Practical Inferences from the Decree of God

How this glorious truth of God’s electing love should humble us! Says Calvin: “Men grossly deceive themselves when they presume they are worth anything. . . . Therefore everything must be brought to nothing so that God’s grace only may be acknowledged. . . . Our salvation is grounded upon God’s mere election and free grace.”

Besides, election is the only thing that gives our lives significance. The Dutch peasants discovered this when they learned from their Reformed teachers that even a life spent growing tulips and potatoes could be lived to God’s glory, seeing that God was pleased to choose them to salvation.

Also, much comfort may be drawn from this doctrine. Says David Dickson: “The knowledge of God’s eternal good will to us is a sufficient cordial to soften and sweeten all our grief and affliction in this life.”

Lastly, if we have sound Scriptural grounds for believing that God has chosen us to salvation in Christ, we will be filled with wonder, love and praise. Just as David once exclaimed: “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that Thou hast brought me hitherto?” (2 Samuel 7.18), so we may exclaim: “Why me?”

(9) Reprobation

If the doctrine of election is awe-inspiring, that of reprobation is even more so. This is why Calvin called it the *decretum horribile*. By this he did not mean a horrible decree to be rejected by all tender-hearted men, but an awe-some decree, calculated to make us all tremble before God. And so it is.

Yet the *Westminster Confession* wisely reminds us that the non-elect, or “the rest of mankind, God was pleased . . . to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath *for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.*”

A. The Two Elements in Reprobation

Two elements comprise this doctrine: one sovereign and the other judicial:

First, the sovereign element is known among theologians as preterition. In His inscrutable sovereignty, God sees and finds the reprobate as sinners, and He passes them by. Mozley expresses this truth more fully when he says that the whole human race after the Fall was “one mass of perdition. . . . It pleased God of His sovereign mercy to rescue some and to leave others where they were; to raise some to glory . . . and abandon the rest . . . to eternal punishment.” This is awe-fully solemn.

This sovereign element in reprobation is inactive. It simply does not change people, but leaves them as they are. Our Lord clearly speaks of this aspect when He prays: “I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things [ie of salvation] from the wise and prudent [ie in their own eyes] and hast revealed them unto babes.” (Matthew 11.25). Christopher Love explains this aspect of reprobation: “As God hath decreed such a number of men should be damned, so He hath likewise decreed to suffer those men to walk on after the vain imaginations of their own hearts, and to do that which is right in their own eyes, that so their deserved end may be destruction.”

At this point we must beware of imagining that God infuses any evil into the reprobate compelling them to sin. Reformed theologians generally concur in stating that He merely with-holds grace from them. [The Puritan William Bridge, for example, says that God hardens hearts such as Pharaoh’s, not by infusing malice, but by with-holding grace.] Their warrant for this is Deuteronomy 29.4 - “The Lord hath not given thee eyes to see and ears to hear.” As Christopher Love adds: “God did not put out their eyes or take away their ears.” Zanchius says something similar: “God is the Creator of the wicked, but not of their wickedness; He is the Author of their being, but not the infuser of their sin.”

Second, the judicial element is condemnation. Men are ordained to dishonour and wrath *for their sins*. Note: it is not because they are non-elect, but because they are sinners. God does not condemn non-sinners. He is just and righteous in all His judgments. But since we all deserve to be punished in hell, God has determined to give some precisely what they deserve and to spare others.

Samuel Rutherford also speaks of God's judicial hardening of those who persistently refuse to repent and believe, when God calls them. In this case He not only gives them up to their own ways, but actually hardens their heart. Pharaoh is the classic example of this treatment in Scripture. (Romans 9:17-18). Yet even the older generation of Israel in the wilderness was punished in this way. When they lusted and tempted God, He "gave them their request, but sent lean-ness into their soul." (Psalm 106:15). So, comments Jonathan Edwards, this older generation "was a very froward and perverse generation. They were tainted with the idolatry and wickedness of Egypt, and were not weaned from it . . . This generation God was exceeding angry with, and swore in His wrath that they should not enter into His rest."

B. Reprobation a Reformed Doctrine

In seeking to follow Scripture wherever it leads, Protestant theologians have fully accepted this awesome doctrine. Says Calvin: "There can be no election without its opposite, reprobation." Says Luther: "The sole cause why some are saved and others perish proceeds from His willing the salvation of the former and the perdition of the latter, according to that of St Paul, 'He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth.'" Says Heidegger: "It cannot be doubted that from eternity God has reprobated some. Election itself also teaches this. He who elects some passes over those whom He does not elect, leaves and appoints them to merited judgment." Says Warfield, Scripture both implies and asserts "the removal of the elect by the pure grace of God . . . out of the company of the condemned . . . and the positive just reprobation of the impenitent for their sins."

To those who would cavil at this doctrine, we would simply say, in the words of Luther: "God would be never a whit less good even though He should destroy all men." A true sense of our sin and desert would silence us all. Who then can complain, when God has mercy on some and punishes the rest? The ordaining of most men to wrath in no way impeaches the mercy of God, because God would show more mercy in saving one sinner than He would show injustice in condemning all mankind. "When all deserve death, it is a marvel of pure grace that any receive life." (Boettner).

C. Biblical Proof for Reprobation

The Biblical proof for this doctrine is abundant. We may cite only a few salient passages. “They stumble at the Word, being disobedient; whereunto also they were appointed.” (1 Peter 2:8). “For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Jude 4). “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.” (Romans 1:28). “Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.” (John 12:39-40).

The Biblical terms used to describe reprobation are also abundant. It is called God hating (Malachi 1:2-3), appointing to wrath (1 Thessalonians 5:9), appointing to disobedience (1 Peter 2:8), fitting for destruction (Romans 9:22), ordaining to condemnation (Jude 4) and excluding reprobates’ names from the book of life (Revelation 13:8; 17:8).

D. Practical Conclusions

We may never conclude that anyone is a reprobate. “We dare not, we must not,” says Zanchius, “pronounce any man living to be non-elect, be he at present ever so wicked. The vilest sinner may, for ought we can tell, appertain to the election of grace, and be one day wrought upon by the Spirit of God.” We know, he continues, that the finally unbelieving and unsanctified cannot be saved, “because God in His Word tells us so”, but to say that anyone will never be converted to Christ “would be a most presumptuous assertion, as well as an inexcusable breach of the charity which hopeth all things.”

Let us leave this solemn truth with a spirit of awe. The inscrutable judgment of God is a far deeper abyss than the most perceptive man or angel can penetrate. Our hearts faint within us when we consider even for a moment this truly awesome decree. Augustine’s observation, that ordained vessels of wrath are born for the use of the elect, only increases our awe. “For God,” he says, “created not even them at random, or by chance, or for nothing.” The fact that they are human is good; the added

fact that they are adorned with many gifts for this present life is good; the further fact that God uses them to bless His people is also good. But that they never repent or believe, and yet glorify God's holy justice, fills the heart with indescribable emotions.

Despite the mingled feelings it arouses in us, this truth, along with that of electing love, should be publicly taught from the pulpit and in writing, because it is a doctrine that is expressly revealed. Also, it leaves the ungodly without excuse when they refuse to repent and believe, it stimulates great concern and anxiety concerning our own salvation, and it brings much glory to the justice of God. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right", even where His reprobation of the wicked condemns millions to eternal punishment?

(10) The Execution of the Decree in Creation, Providence and Redemption

God executes His decree in the works of creation, providence and redemption.

His decree concerning *creation* predetermined that He would create all things out of nothing by the Word of His power in six literal days, and all very good.

His decree concerning *providence* includes His holy, wise and all-powerful preservation and government of the whole creation from the moment of its completion.

His decree concerning *redemption* involves His covenant of grace for the salvation of His elect by the Lord Jesus Christ. This covenant is inseparable from the doctrines of election and reprobation.

A. Creation

"The creation is glorious to behold, and it is a pleasant and profitable study." (Thomas Watson). Some think that Isaac meditated on it in the fields in the evening. (Genesis 24:63). Certainly King David did. Psalm 8 has been described as his night meditation and Psalm 19 his day meditation. Psalm 104 is a meditation on creation, more or less in the order in which Moses narrates its origin in Genesis 1 and 2. Indeed, the entire Word of God is full of references to the creative wisdom, power and goodness of God. "The creation is a large volume, in which God's

works are bound up.” (Thomas Watson). We shall do well to study it devoutly.

Setting aside all human hypotheses on the topic, which (from Aristotle and beyond to Dawkins, Hawking) are all sin-blinded conjectures, we shall attend briefly to what the Creator Himself has to say on it.

(1) The Chief Elements in the Doctrine of Creation

First, God created all things. They do not have an eternal existence, nor did they originate by chance or fate, but came into being as He made them. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” (Genesis 1.1). Let us never forget that Evolutionism, in any form, is “a basic dogma of rationalism” (Sir Arthur Keith); that it is more a religion than a science; and that it is widely accepted not because it is true but because it is the ungodly man’s self-constructed alternative to special creation. Because he does not like to retain God in his knowledge, the natural man must devise some substitute. And because Evolution demands nothing from him, it conveniently serves his turn.

Second, He created them out of nothing. They were not moulded from pre-existent matter or spirit. “Before the creation,” says Robert Bolton, “there was properly neither ‘when’ nor ‘where’, but only an incomprehensible perfection of indivisible immensity and eternity.” The moment ‘before’ they were created (if for convenience we can speak of ‘before’ in a timeless eternity), they did not exist. The moment God willed them into being, they did exist. “For He spake, and it was; He commanded, and it stood fast.” (Psalm 33:9). “And God said, Let light be! And light was!” (Genesis 1:3). What majesty is in God!

Third, He created them because it pleased Him. Creation was not necessary. God was free to create or not to create. So, says Calvin, “all things in heaven and earth derive their essence . . . at His will.” “Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created.” (Revelation 4:11). Comments William Hendriksen: “It is the song of creation. The sovereign will of God is the real and ultimate reason for the existence of all things.”

Fourth, He created them by the power of His Word and Spirit. Each divine Person had a distinct hand in the work. “By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath (or spirit) of His mouth.” (Psalm 33.6). “In the beginning was the Word, and the

Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:1, 3). So, comments George Horne: “By the instrumentality of the eternal Word and the Spirit, the old heavens and earth were made . . . Glory is due from man to God - the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit.”

Fifth, He created them in six literal days. The Biblical account offers not the slightest suggestion of the distribution of the work over vast, indefinite geological periods. At first He made the original matter of the universe instantaneously. (Genesis 1:1-2). Then over a period of a normal week He moulded and organized it into the amazing cosmos that we now inhabit. The repeated reference to evening and morning in the creation account, and the ordaining of man’s cycle of work and rest according to God’s creative model, both assure us of this. (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23; Exodus 20:11).

Sixth, He created all things very good. There was neither defect nor deformity nor the seed of death in God’s original handiwork. (Genesis 1:10, 12,18, 21, 25, 31). Let us never forget, in the words of John Pearson, that “there is no nature originally sinful, no substance in itself evil.” Calvin’s observations are also apposite: “After the workmanship of the world was complete in all its parts,” he says, “and had received . . . the last finishing touch, He pronounced it perfectly good, that we may know that there is in the symmetry of God’s works the highest perfection, to which nothing can be added.”

Seventh, He created them with an indescribable beauty. “He hath made everything beautiful in His time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Speaking of the “ravishing beauty” of the universe, Calvin exclaims: “If a small portion of the works of God makes us amazed, how inadequate are our feeble minds to comprehend their whole extent!”

Eighth, He created them all for the use of man. By preparing everything which He foresaw would be useful and beneficial to man, God clearly demonstrates that He arranged the motions of the sun, planets and stars; filled the earth with an abundance of good things; and created man last of all; so that Adam would stand amazed at the care His Creator had taken over him. David catches something of this amazement when he exclaims: “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?” (Psalm 8:3-4).

Ninth, He created them all for His own glory. “The Lord hath made all things for Himself.” (Proverbs 16:4). “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handywork.” (Psalm 19:1). God’s bountiful provision and fatherly care are never intended to make man self-centred and independent. Rather they are designed to draw out our hearts to His praise. “There is,” therefore, says Calvin, “no part of our life, and no action so minute, that it ought not to be directed to the glory of God.” As all things are from Him, so they should be reflected back to Him. Eloquent testimony to this high ideal is afforded by a wonderful passage in Calvin: “In every part of the world, in heaven and on earth, God has . . . engraven the glory of His power, goodness, wisdom and eternity. Truly indeed, then, has Paul said that the Lord never left Himself without a witness, even to those to whom He has sent no knowledge of His Word. For all creatures, from the firmament even to the centre of the earth, are witnesses and messengers of His glory to all men, drawing them on to seek Him, and having found Him, to do Him service and honour according to the dignity of a Lord so good, so powerful, wise and everlasting; they were even helping each one in his place upon that quest. For the little singing birds sang of God, the animals acclaimed Him, the elements feared and the mountains resounded with Him, the rivers and springs threw glances towards Him, the grasses and the flowers smiled. So that in truth there was no need to seek Him afar, since He meets us in the very fabric of the world.” Since, therefore, “the whole universe is lit up by God,” (Cornelius Van Til), how we should strive with all our hearts to see and acknowledge Him wherever we turn our eyes.

Tenth, He rested on the completion of His work of creation. “The rest of God,” says Witsius, “consisted not only in His ceasing from the work . . . but also in that sweet satisfaction and delight He had in the demonstration of His own attributes and perfections, which were gloriously displayed in the work He had now finished.”

Eleventh, nothing specific is revealed in Scripture concerning the creation of angels. We read only that when the foundations of the earth were laid “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.” (Job 38:7). This is understood to refer to the angels. From this we may infer that the angels were the first created beings. The creation of holy, intelligent spirits therefore preceded the creation of matter.

(2) Conclusion

The doctrine of creation continues to be the subject of many disputes. This is not surprising in view of our evil heart of unbelief. As long as men continue to refuse the witness of God's holy, infallible Word, and to seek out as many inventions as they can to deny the authority of the Creator over His creatures, they will reject the plain account of Moses in Genesis. Yet not only in Genesis, but throughout the entire Scriptures, God is revealed as "the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary." (Isaiah 40:28).

Furthermore, since God is the Author of both books — Creation and Scripture (see Psalm 19) — there is no real conflict between these two revelations He has made of Himself. Therefore the believer must always be careful to give an exact exposition of the Word of God on the topic, while the scientist must humbly acknowledge that his scanty knowledge yields only a partial and sin-affected interpretation of the cosmos whose mysteries he seeks to probe. Let us all "stand in awe, and sin not."

B. Providence

The second sphere in which the decree of God is executed is that of providence. As Warfield reminds us: "Providence is but Predestination in its execution; Predestination is but Providence in its intention . . . the common idea which gives its content to both is control." Of the work of God's providence our Lord says: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." (John 5:17). Since God rested from His work of creation (Genesis 2:2) this saying must refer to His work of providence. In creation God brought everything into being; in providence He causes it to continue in being. Providence therefore describes God's continuous ordering in time of all that He ordained in His eternal purpose.

It is necessary at the outset to remind ourselves that there is a providence. There is no such thing as either fate (the Stoic view) or chance (the Epicurean view). Even the lot that is cast into the lap is disposed by the Lord (Proverbs 16:33). For this we should be profoundly thankful. It is a great comfort to the people of God. Asks Boettner: "Who would not prefer to have his affairs in the hands of a God of infinite power, wisdom, holiness and love, rather than to have them left to fate, or chance, or irrevocable natural law, or to short-sighted and perverted self?" Those who reject God's providence should consider what alternatives they have

left. So John Duncan acknowledges God's providence in his own inimitably humble way: "I wonder at the goodness of God, how I have been cared for, provided for - I, a poor shoemaker's son. Providence has been kind."

The fact of providence is immensely important. It entails the rejection of all non-theistic views of the world's history. Such views as Deism, which makes God's activity end with creation, leaving the universe to run on its own by natural law, and Pantheism, which regards the world's development as the unfolding of the Being of God, are both atheistic at the core. So are the cyclic view of history propounded by Hinduism and the Evolutionary view of Darwin. All these views are the product of man's sin-darkened mind. By contrast, the Scriptures set forth with majestic clarity God's continuing relationship to the cosmos He has created.

Nor must the etymology of the term 'providence' mislead us into thinking that it is nothing more than divine foresight. Turretin rightly includes within it God's foresight, His fore-ordination and His effectual administration of all He has decreed. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that the decree of providence is not providence itself, although the latter falls out exactly as the former determined.

(1) The Two Elements in Providence

The Westminster Shorter Catechism states that "God's works of providence are His most holy, wise and powerful *preserving* and *governing* all His creatures and all their actions." Providence therefore includes both preservation and government.

First, Preservation. Scripture expressly asserts the preservation of the world by its Creator. "Thou, even Thou, art Lord alone; Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and Thou preservest them all." (Nehemiah 9:6). This is a staggering statement. Psalms 104–107 sing the praises of God for His providential preservation. Psalm 36:6 exclaims in wonder: "O Lord, Thou preservest man and beast." Psalm 148:6 expressly links God's providence to His decree. Acts 17:28 informs us that it is in God that we live, move and have our being. Colossians 1:17 tells us that by Christ "all things consist", or are compacted or hold together. In short, the universe would collapse into nothing should God remove His preserving power.

Thus, the whole creation is upheld not by impersonal laws that God has built into it, nor by His immediate power without laws, but by His almighty concurrence with the laws He has made. How He does this is inscrutable to us. But the fact itself is clear. He hangs the earth upon nothing. He rides upon the wings of the wind. He raises up some and casts down others. He supplies energy to the sun to provide us with light and heat. He preserves all things by His almighty wisdom and power.

Second, Government. It is especially by His government of all things that God secures the accomplishment of His eternal purpose concerning them. As their universal King, God rules with supreme authority and absolute power. “The Lord reigneth, He is clothed with majesty.” (Psalm 93:1). “The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice.” (Psalm 97:1).

This government includes both design and control. Throughout the whole extent of His rule, God governs according to purpose. That is, God deliberately intends do whatever He does. In Romans 9:19, the word elsewhere translated ‘purpose’ appears as ‘will.’ This indicates the teleological nature of the universe. Nothing happens by chance. Nothing operates at random. The strong control of God is everywhere. Robert Leighton offers a wonderfully fitting image of this control when he reminds us that the whole course of history is like a ship crossing the great sea of time. Some on board, he says, are facing the haven to which the ship is sailing. Others have their back turned against it. Whichever way the passengers face, he concludes, the Great Pilot steers the ship to the destination of His choice. O may we be found agreeing with Him in this all-important matter!

(2) Practical Considerations

Let us never forget the all-embracing extent of the government of God. Nothing is excluded from it. From the tiniest insect whose shimmering life is extinguished within a day to the immortality of the holy angels, God’s providence extends over all. His empire is universal. How we should rejoice that our times are in His hands, not in our own hands or the hands of Satan or world leaders; that the hearts of men, great and small, are also under His perfect control; and that the rise and fall of vast empires falls within the orbit of His providential government.

Within this universal empire is the Kingdom of God’s Church. Over this He exercises a special providential care. Psalm 87 is only one passage of Scripture among many which points us to His loving provision for its

welfare. May we be both stabilized and comforted by this consideration.

Let us also remind ourselves that this care embraces the stirring up of all the Church's enemies and the trouble they bring on it. It is God who stirred up the Chaldeans against Israel to wean her (despite the terrible cost in life, property and happiness) from idolatry. It is God who stirred up his enemies against Paul (though ultimately it cost him his life) so that His Gospel would claim its trophies at the very heart of the empire. He therefore controls "acts of all sorts, whether voluntary or involuntary, gracious or sinful." (John Arrowsmith). Does God send trouble? asks Warfield. "Surely, surely," he replies. "He and He only. To the sinner in punishment, to His children in chastisement. To suggest that it does not always come from His hands is to take away all our comfort." Let us never then be guilty of seeing only apparently favourable events as providential, after the manner of some. Psalms 79 and 80, to name no others, clearly attribute the troubles of the righteous to God's afflictive hand, while calling on Him alone to deliver from trouble.

God's universal providence should also calm our minds regarding the universal spread of the Gospel. While we should do all we can to promote the evangelization of mankind, we must still realize that God's providence is perfectly adequate to fulfil His purpose. Therefore "He will assuredly send His Gospel in His providence to whomsoever His grace has set upon to save." (B.B. Warfield).

Nor should we forget why God rules over all. Says John Duncan: "Would we know why the world is governed? It is for the glory of God in His Church." While this government has a vaster scope than our puny minds can ever grasp, may we concur that it is a blessed truth that we are not placed within the inexorable grinding of an impersonal machine, but live by the animating heart and all-guiding hand of almighty God, our heavenly Father. If this truth involves the permission of sin, let us rest content that God's justice shall be glorified in its punishment, and His grace glorified in its forgiveness.

May we praise Him for His ever-present providential activity. Comments George Hutcheson: "The glorious manifestations of God in the world ought to be looked upon with reverence, admiration and humble wondering." And so Psalm 107:43 admonishes us: "Whoso is wise will observe these things."

C. Redemption

The execution of the decree of redemption is usually treated under the heading of Soteriology, or the Doctrine of Salvation. There it often appears in terms of God's eternal Covenant of Redemption or Grace. This is because, in proceeding to execute His plan for the salvation of His elect, God made Christ His Son their covenant Head. Yet this too was agreed on in eternity, and is therefore included under the heading of God's decree.

However, it is typically dealt with under the heading of Christology (or the Doctrine of Christ), Pneumatology (or the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit). Yet, we mention redemption under the decree of God to remind us that all God's activities, both within Himself and outside Himself, are inseparably linked. There is not one single broken link in the entire chain of revealed truth.

End Note

The division of theology into its various compartments is always a concession to the puniness of our minds. We must bear in mind that what is separable to us is inseparable in God. His *names* apply to each and all of His *three persons*, and His *decretive will* is the will of those three persons conjointly. Therefore when we think of any of God's names or any aspect of His decree, let us always think of it in terms of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



- (b) “God is free to work without, above and against means, at His pleasure.” (Westminster Divines)
- (c) “While man’s heart is least conformable to the rule of God’s law, it is absolutely subject to the rule of His providence.” (Thomas White)
- (d) “The Lord’s procedure is to be tried by His Word, and not His Word by His procedure.” (Jonathan Ranken Anderson)
- (e) “Under God’s government, the punishment of every sin is inevitable.” (Robert L Dabney)
- (f) “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.” (William Cowper)

4. State, with Biblical support for your answer, why the doctrine of election should be such a comfort to true believers.

PART TWO: THE PURSUIT OF GOD

Introduction

In his book *The Soul's Quest For God* R.C.Sroul reminds us that while “Christianity engages the mind” and calls us to a “radically transcendent view of life and the world”, it is beyond all this an “affair of the heart.” That is, whatever knowledge of God He is pleased to give us must never remain merely in our minds. It must seep down into the deepest recesses of our hearts. There it will engage and captivate our affections and wills, leading us to love and obey our gracious God.

This truth reminds us that it is awfully possible to accumulate a store of theological knowledge while our hearts remain spiritually sterile. There is no lack of scholars in the Church distinguished for their learning. But creed, and a host of titles to our name, can save no-one. Indeed, academic detachment and unsanctified knowledge only puff us up with pride. It is with the heart that we believe unto righteousness. And where the heart is full of God, there is humility, where God Himself dwells. The pursuit of knowledge, even of the knowledge of God, is insufficient. As Augustine nobly says: “Thou hast created us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.”

Now because our first duty is to *love* the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, all the knowledge of God we acquire must be turned into love for Him. Indeed, the more we know Him the more we shall love Him, because He is in the strictest and fullest sense altogether lovely and adorable. This is why from this point we must proceed to the great question of how we are to love God so as to delight in Him as our chief joy.

King David sets the answer in motion by saying: “O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy.” (Psalm 43:3-4) That is, God Himself must shine on us the light and truth of His own blessedness, glory and favour, as revealed through our Lord Jesus Christ, till we reach the point where He Himself, in all the beauty of His being, character, decree, works, word and salvation, are our inexpressible joy. Even the slightest acquaintance with the spiritual and moral beauty of Christ will kindle our affections and wills into loving obedience. By increased devotion to Him that tiny spark

will grow, first into a consuming flame, then into an “inextinguishable blaze. In heaven we shall enjoy God to our fullest capacity. “Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”(Psalm 16:11) Meanwhile, our pilgrimage through this life is largely characterized by ardent desires after God. For as the Puritan John Howe says, *love* consists first in *desire*, then in *delight* (desire in seeking, delight in finding). Here we turn to our pursuit of God, our desire for Him.

1. Desire for God in Scripture

Desire for God is one of the chief characteristics mentioned in Scripture of those who really know Him.

No sooner has King David exclaimed “The Lord is my light and my salvation” than he cries out: “One thing have I *desired* of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.” (Psalm 27:1, 4) Comments William Plumer: “So to see as to enjoy the whole of God’s character as revealed in Scripture is given to none but regenerate souls.” He adds: “The great error of the wicked respecting Christ is that when they see Him there is in their eyes no beauty that they should desire Him.” George Horne expressively traces the saint’s desire to its fulfillment in delight: “The victories of Christ terminated in His triumphant return to a better Jerusalem; and this ought to be the ‘one thing desired’ by the Christian, that, after his conquest over the body of sin, he may pass the un-numbered days of eternity in the courts of heaven, contemplating the beauty and glory of his Redeemer.”

Similarly, soon after exclaiming “O Lord, thou art my God”, the prophet Isaiah confesses to Him: “Yea, in the way of thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for thee; the desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of thee. With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early.” (Isaiah 25:1; 26:8-9) Both collectively and individually the people of God should wait on Him, longing to see His name honoured, even in the darkest times. These desires towards God, comments Matthew Henry, should be “inward, fervent and sincere.”

So too the apostle Paul tells his Philippian fellow-believers that he has a “desire to depart and to be with Christ”, who is God. (Philippians 1:23; 2:6) Comments Daille: “We only love and desire anything for the good

that we see in it.” Paul saw that to be in heaven was more desirable for himself than even the privilege of serving Christ and receiving the love and honour of God’s people in the churches. “His own good made him desire to be with Christ.” His knowledge of Christ, especially of the love of Christ, so arrested and captivated his affections and will—“the love of Christ constrains us” (2 Corinthians 5:14)—that he had no doubt that changing his place, from earth to heaven, was far more desirable even than anything earth can afford. “That blessed sanctuary”, as Daille describes it, is every Christian’s true home. “O that we were there!” says the carol. “O that we were there!”

The Holy Spirit uses various expressions to denote this ardent spiritual desire.

Sometimes it appears as hungering and thirsting: “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8) “His fruit was sweet to my taste.” (Song of Solomon 2:3) “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:2) “My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory, as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.” (Psalm 63:1-2)

At other times it is described as seeking Him. Says David: “When thou saidst, Seek ye my face, my heart said unto thee, thy face, Lord, will I seek.” (Psalm 27:8) Malachi consoles seeking believers with the assurance: “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple.” (Malachi 3:1) The reference is to the coming of Christ their Messiah and ours. Such seeking contains a longing for God that almost breaks Job’s heart: “O that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat! (that is, to His mercy-seat, or throne of grace, or lid of expiation.)” (Job 23:3)

On one occasion at least this desire for God is compared to a sweet aroma: “Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee.” (Song of Solomon 1:3) James Durham explains: “Christ abounds in grace.” His good ointments are the “good and excellent graces” with which He is furnished for the relief of “empty and needy sinners.” His name is “Himself” or “the knowledge of Him” through “His attributes, word, works, especially those of redemption.” His name is compared to ointment, not “sealed up” in a vase, but “diffused” in all its fragrance. In short, the “unfolding” of whatever is in Christ, will be more refreshing

and full of “spiritual delights” than the outpouring of many vases of costly ointments on our bodies could be. Experience of this made a dear servant of God once cry out in prayer: “Lord, give us a nostril! Give us a nostril! that we may get a sweet savour of Christ!”

Significantly, the very last cry of believers in the whole Bible, in response to their Saviour’s promise to come soon, is the outburst of longing desire: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20)

2. Desire for God in Church History

Following the close of the canon of Holy Scripture, outstanding among God’s saints for their insatiable desires after God are Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux and Samuel Rutherford of Anwoth.

Augustine’s *Confessions* are little more than one continuous outstretching of the hands of his hungry soul for the God of all grace. The following quotations are a mere sample: “I will seek thee, Lord, by calling on thee; and will call on thee, believing in thee; for to us hast thou been preached.” “Oh that I might repose on thee! Oh that thou wouldest enter into my heart, and inebriate it, that I may forget my ills, and embrace thee, my sole good! . . . Oh for thy mercy’s sake, tell me, O Lord my God, what thou art unto me. *Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation.*” “Hear, Lord, my prayer; let not my soul faint under thy discipline, nor let me faint in confessing unto thee all thy mercies, whereby thou hast drawn me out of all my most evil ways, that thou mightest become a delight to me above all the allurements which I once pursued; that I may most entirely love thee, and clasp thy hand with all my affections, and thou mayest yet rescue me from every temptation, even unto the end.”

Recalling his first trip to Carthage, “where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves”, he notes: “within me was a famine of that inward food, thyself, my God.” As he bent his mind to the study of “the holy Scriptures” he continues, I “hungered and thirsted . . . after thee thyself.” Yet it was not until he was brought to Christ, following an anguished struggle against both the lies of the philosophers and the backward pull of the flesh, did he find the object of this deep-rooted desire. “Then I sought a way of obtaining strength sufficient to enjoy thee; and found it not until I embraced that Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, who is over all, God blessed for evermore,

calling unto me and saying, I am the way, the truth, and the life.” From that moment on, till the day his ardent spirit entered glory, Augustine’s life continued to be one long-drawn-out desire for God. That desire is epitomized in his prayer: “Let thy mercy hearken unto my desire.”

