

# Who is God?

And what is He like?

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## **Part 1 Starting Points**

## **1. The lies we believe about God**

What we believe matters. Our behaviours and feelings, the choices we make – whether wise or foolish – are all linked to whether we believe truth or lies about God, Creation, Humanity and New Creation.

We're now going to look at what we should believe about God and see how that affects our lives. What lies do people believe about God? Well, here are some of the big lies that people have believed about God throughout history.

### **God is distant**

Like most lies, this one starts with a kernel of truth. It seeks to recognise that God is distinct from his creation; that he is transcendent. However, the result is that God is seen as distant, unloving, impersonal, and disinterested in the World that he has made. This God is not knowable.

This belief was the root cause of a number of ancient heresies. For example, the Gnostics believed that because the true God was pure Spirit that matter (created things) was evil. They therefore believed that God would not have been directly involved in creation, attributing this work to lesser and possibly malign deities. Likewise, if God is distant, then he is unlikely to get involved in the mess of a fallen creation through incarnation; thus a number of early heretics denied that Jesus really was fully God and fully man. Indeed, this argument was already being made when the first apostles were still alive (see 1 John 4:1).

### **God is near but small**

In contrast to those who see God as distant and impersonal, others have wanted to emphasise his nearness and intimacy. For many, this results in polytheism and idolatry as they end up with a multiplicity of gods that are interested in their lives but so near that they have become small and unable to exercise sovereignty over the entire Universe.

Such gods are powerless to really help us in life. Often they seem to require appeasing and winning over. We seek to manipulate and control them. Polytheism may be seen when people overtly choose to worship a number of different gods; but it can also be seen when people look to specific people and things to supply meaning e.g. money, sex, fame, power, celebrities etc.

We also see others who theoretically remain monotheists but they seek to reduce God down to their own definition of him by emphasising specific characteristics with the result that God is weakened as other aspects of his character are denied. Classically this happens when people attempt to explain the problem of suffering. The problem is presented in the following terms.

If God were both loving and sovereign, then He would be willing and able to prevent suffering. As suffering exists, then God must either be unwilling or unable to prevent it.

It seems preferable to think of God as unable rather than unwilling and so God's love is emphasised at the cost of his sovereignty. Open Theism<sup>1</sup> presents a theoretically consistent form of this argument, but we can all at times slip into ways of thinking and behaving which suggest we have too small a view of God. Whenever we act out of fear rather than faith, we are saying that God is small.

### **God will change his mind**

Open Theists argue that God does change his mind and identify specific Bible passages which they believe prove this. They argue that God sometimes makes mistakes and/or acts on limited information because He is unable to see the future.

Most Christians will at least theoretically believe that God is able to see the future (His foreknowledge) and that God does not change, but once again we can live as though we believe He will change his mind. This is seen when we struggle to exercise faith in God's promises and particularly when we are tempted to believe that he will cease to love us and act towards us in love.

### **God doesn't change his mind because He is stubborn/impersonal**

We may end up holding an orthodox position by believing that God does not change, but still have a distorted view of what this means. In human behaviour, we tend to associate unwillingness to change with stubbornness and a lack of flexibility. If we read this association across onto God, then we end up seeing him in a negative light. We might once again fear that God is distant and disinterested and so our prayers are pointless, falling on deaf ears.

### **God does not and cannot love me**

There are few things sadder than hearing someone say with utter conviction that God not only does not love them, but that He cannot. They believe that who they are, the things they have said and done and the things said and done to them mean that they are unlovely and unlovable. They see their circumstances as evidence that God is specifically distant from them or that if He is near, it is only to punish and harm. Such a view of God will lead to despair.

### **God will not judge**

Then there are those who argue that a loving God cannot punish sin by sending people to hell. For example, author Rob Bell has titled one of his books "Love Wins." Judgement and punishment are seen as incompatible with love, mercy and forgiveness.

If belief that God does not love leads to despair, then belief that God will not act in judgement leads to arrogance, the belief that I can do as I please.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Theism is an approach to the Doctrine of God which attempts to explain how a God of love can allow suffering. It emphasises human free will following the Arminian position to its logical conclusion that genuine human freedom must place constraints on God's ability to foreknow and to predestine. The theory is particularly associated with Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994).

In fact, each of these lies will tend to either despair or arrogance. We either believe that because God is distant or powerless that we are in charge and we can do as we please, or we believe that because God is distant or powerless, we live without hope.

Arrogance will lead to recklessness and selfishness. I will live for today and I will live to please myself. Despair may cause me to look for ways to escape from the reality of life and to dull the pain of suffering. That's why when we meet people who are in a mess such as debt, addiction or broken relationships that a good starting point is to ask them what they believe about God. At the root of their mess is likely to be a faulty understanding of God and therefore a false god or idol.

## **2. Talking about God –starting in a surprising place**

Lies about God lead to mess and destruction in our lives. So we will want to respond to those lies with truth in order to re-orientate and correct our view of what God is like. Where to begin? Now here's the surprise: we're going to start by talking about the Doctrine of the Trinity. That might seem like a very odd direction in which to take our discussion. Here we are trying to think practically about our beliefs and now we're being asked to delve into one of the more difficult, hard to understand and potentially controversial aspects of doctrine. This sounds like a wrong turning away from practical down to earth stuff and towards obscure, academic debate.

Surely we'd do better to start with something like "God is love"? Well, here's the second surprise. You are right to think this. You see, the idea that God is not love is one of the greatest lies that people believe. It's not something we'd come out and say directly. In fact, most of the lies we believe are rarely stated in such stark terms. We tend to deceive ourselves; we say that we believe God is love because the Bible says so, but, in reality, we see the evidence of disbelief all around us.

We see disbelief in the Doctrine of God's Love when preachers fail to talk about God's love winsomely and often fear that they will become fluffy and fail to properly defend the truth. They end up relegating talk of God's love to the songs we sing in church.

We see disbelief when someone simply cannot grasp that God loves them and has forgiven them and they become overwhelmed with a burden of guilt and despair.

We accept the lie that God is not love when we act as though we have to earn our salvation and that we can lose it again.

We say that God is not love when we decide that the teaching of Scripture is too difficult or too harsh and so we have to find a way around it. We conclude that human mercy is more loving than God's Law.

So we do want to deal with those lies about God's love and here is the third surprise. The best place to start a defence of the Doctrine of God's Love is with the Doctrine of the Trinity!



## **Part 2 God is Trinity**

### 3. God is love and God is Trinity

Mike Reeves opens his book “The Good God” with this comment:

“God is love”: those three words could hardly be more bouncy. They seem lively, lovely and as warming as a crackling fire. But ‘God is a Trinity’? No, hardly the same effect, that sounds cold and stodgy.<sup>2</sup>

But like me, Reeves is firmly convinced that the two phrases go hand in hand, adding, “Yes the Trinity can be presented as a fusty and irrelevant dogma, but the truth is that God is love because God is a Trinity.”<sup>3</sup>

#### For the Bible tells me so

We find the phrase “God is Love” in a letter that the apostle John wrote. One of John’s concerns was to ensure that his readers would not be led astray by false teachers and in 1 John 4, he gives advice on how to discern whether something is from God or not. In verse two, he tells us: “This is how you recognise the Spirit of God: Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God.”

In other words, if we want to know whether someone who claims to be speaking from and for God is telling the truth, then a key test will be what they have to say about Jesus and his incarnation. Yarborough says that “This is often and plausibly taken as a rebuttal of the Docetism that arose in the early church and competed with the view that Jesus was both fully God and fully human.”<sup>4</sup> You see, there were two errors doing the rounds about Jesus at the time John wrote. For some people, Jesus was just an ordinary man, maybe a very clever, wise, spiritual and loving man, but just a man. Others believed that Jesus was very special, a spiritual being sent from God who appeared in human guise, but wasn’t actually a real human being. He just had that appearance. John mainly has that second error in his sights here. Jesus really did “come in the flesh;” he was fully human. However, to talk about Jesus coming is to use incarnational language – the idea that Jesus came to earth from heaven. Jesus did not start to exist at his birth. He himself claimed to have been in existence before his famous ancestor, Abraham.

John then goes on to say that the evidence of true faith is not just in what we say and believe, but in what we do and how we live. Specifically, he says that we should “love one another because love comes from God.”<sup>5</sup> Love marks us out and shows whether or not we really are from God because, and it is at this point that he introduces us to that vital and wonderful phrase, “God is love.”<sup>6</sup>

A Christian is someone who relates to God as Father (Jesus talks about our conversion as being like “new birth” – John 3:16) and so they should share something of his characteristic traits, just as a human child reflects his or her human father and mother’s characteristics including looks and personality. God is love – it is something essential to his character and so we should reflect it in our lives by loving one another.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Reeves, *The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), vii.

<sup>3</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, vii

<sup>4</sup> Yarborough, *1-3 John* (ECNT), 223.

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 1:7.

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:7-8.

Now this is the really important bit. John goes on to describe a little about what he means by the word love. Love means that God takes the initiative; he loves us before we love him.<sup>7</sup> Love is demonstrated in a very specific event: God “sent his only Son into the World that we might live through him.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, this love is seen on the Cross; “he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”<sup>9</sup>

See here that ethics (how we should live) are explicitly tied into doctrine (what we should believe). See also that the idea that God is love is firmly rooted in Trinitarian Thinking. We cannot talk about God and love without talking about the Father and the Son. Why is this so?

### **How can God be love?**

What I find really exciting about John’s little phrase, what makes those three words “bounce,” is that John does not simply say “God loves.” It’s not just that God chooses at some point in history to start loving his creation. God is love. This is a quality or characteristic that is essential to him. It’s not something that he started to do and it’s not something that he will stop doing. It is in God’s nature to go on and on loving. I remember as a child in Sunday School singing a slightly quaint little chorus to the tune of Puff the Magic Dragon (I kid you not). It went something like this.

Love is like a circle, a circle big and round  
For when you see a circle no ending can be found  
And so the love of Jesus goes on eternally  
Forever and forever, I know that God loves me

Now, if we had just taken the first two lines on their own, then we could not say them without any certainty of truth. Love does not always go on without ending. Relationships end, people hurt one another, death comes, love fades. There is no guarantee of “happy ever after”. However, the song isn’t simply an ode to the concept or feeling of love, but specifically to God’s love and whoever wrote it insisted (correctly according to John) that this love is eternal.

It is only because God exists as a Trinity that he can be love. Why do we insist on this? Well, let’s just think through what it would mean if God was not Trinity. This would mean that before God began to create, he was completely and utterly alone, a single person. Such a being could not really love because it had nothing and no-one to love unless it just loved itself (we call that narcissism).

Then, at some point, this being chose to create the Universe and start to love its creatures. This would mean two things. First of all, that God changed; he went from not loving to loving. Secondly, it would make God dependent on his creation; he made the world because he needed something to love. It is fascinating that religions that deny the Trinity often want to emphasise that God is unchanging and that God is sovereign and yet they end up with a God who must change and who far from being sovereign is dependent. Such religions, if followed consistently, must require us to deny that God is Love.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:10.

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:9.

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:10.

Mike Reeves helpfully paints the picture of what this alternative God is like. We would know such a God primarily as Creator and Ruler. Reeves provides three propositions about our relationship to such a God.

First of all, if God's very identity is to be the Creator, the Ruler, then he needs a creation to rule in order to be who he is. For all his cosmic power, then, God turns out to be pitifully weak: he needs us.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly,

If God is the Ruler and the problem is that I've broken the rules, the only salvation he can offer is to forgive me and treat me as if I had kept the rules.<sup>11</sup>

This means that He becomes a "traffic cop" God.<sup>12</sup>

And so thirdly:

If salvation simply means him letting me off, and counting me as a law abiding citizen then gratitude (not love) is all I have. In other words, I can never really love the God who is essentially just 'The Ruler.' And that ironically means I can never keep the greatest commandment: to love the Lord my God.<sup>13</sup>

John's picture of God is far more wonderful. God is Love because he is eternally love. The Father eternally loves the Son lavishing his affection to him. The Son eternally loves the Father, delighting to please and obey him. The Spirit eternally loves the Father and the Son seeking to bring glory and honour to them. Therefore, God creates, not out of need but out of grace; creation is an outworking, an overflow of his love and his joy. God loves us first. God does not change. He did not start to love. His love is eternal. He will not stop being love. We can have confidence in his love and care.

This means that we can know God as Father and know that we are loved by him. It means that the right response is to love him back and so we can and should obey the first and greatest commandment to love God with all our heart, mind and strength.

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<sup>10</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, 2.

## 4. The Father and the Son

### What sort of Father?

Some of us might find it hard to think of God as Father. It holds too many negative connotations. For some, it will bring them face to face with their own failings and inadequacies as dads and as men. You know that you have been the absent or impatient dad. Then there are the stereotypes that our culture conjures up and associates with anything masculine: lad culture, incomplete projects, inability to multitask etc.

Sadly, for many, the word “father” stirs up painful memories, reminders from a past that we have tried to bury deep down and forget about; a dad that was distant or absent, a father who set high and harsh standards that we never could live up to. Worse still, too many associate the word “dad” with emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Perhaps we would rather not think of God as “Father” at all. Could we instead worship a mother goddess or better still depersonalise God and take away the gender connotations simply referring to the members of the Trinity by functions (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer)? There are in fact a number of dangers with going down this route, but the key thing here is this: it is for God to reveal who he is, not for us to define him. You see, when we try to define God, we end up getting things the wrong way round. We describe God as a father and think “God is a bit like my daddy.” Now this may mean we associate him with the good things: the dad who mended my toys, took me walking in the hills and brought home delicious sweets, or it may mean that we associate God with those negative things. The point is that, either way, we have limited God and fashioned him in our own image. It is not that God is a bit like my dad; it’s that my dad at his best was meant to be a bit like the Heavenly Father.

So God chooses to reveal himself as Father. As Robert Letham comments,

The name Father is not merely a simile (as if God is simply like a father) or even a metaphor (an unusual use of language drawing attention to aspects of God’s nature in surprising terms), but rather a definite personal name. In contrast, the term mother, when used in reference to God, in the OT, is a simile, but never a metaphor and it is completely absent in the NT. Father is the proper name for God and does not merely describe what he is like.”<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, we will want to find out more about how the Bible portrays God as Father. In so doing, we discover that this is not a randomly selected title for God in the New Testament, but an image built up throughout the whole of Scripture. It is however, an idea that takes time to build. As Letham puts it, “While the distinctive covenant name of God YHWH, occurs nearly seven thousand times in the OT, God calls himself ‘Father’ only just over twenty times.”<sup>15</sup>

### The Father of Israel

Perhaps one of the most moving references to God’s Fatherhood in the Old Testament is Hosea 11 where God says: “When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I have called my son.” (Hosea 11:1) Here we see that God speaks as the father of the nation of Israel. In a moving poem, Hosea

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<sup>14</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 27.

retells the history of Israel in terms of this Father – Son relationship. The Son is called out of Egypt (reminding us of the Exodus), he is “taught to walk” (11:3), healed (11:3) and “led with chords of human kindness” (11:4). God takes Israel “by their arms (11:3), lifts “yoke from their neck” (11:4) and feeds them (11:4). This is a tender and compassionate father.

However, Israel are forgetful; they turn to idols instead of the living God and risk further exile. Despite all this, the fatherly nature of God means that he cannot give them up and hand them over to judgement for ever (11:8). No, this father’s “compassion is aroused.” Fatherhood speaks of faithful love. Letham says, “The name Father usually refers to the covenantal relationship of Yahweh to Israel (Ex 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1)”<sup>16</sup>

Note the other reference mentioned by Letham takes us back to the Exodus, to the very point where God acts to deliver Israel from slavery. There God tells Moses

Then say to Pharaoh, “This is what Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, ‘let my son go, so that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:22-23).

God is telling Moses about the judgement which will come upon Egypt because of how the Israelites had been cruelly treated and kept as slaves. Moses is to tell Pharaoh to let the people leave Egypt, but Pharaoh will refuse, resulting in a succession of horrific plagues. The last plague will be the death of all the first born sons, including the heir to the throne. Again, we see something of the father’s love for his son: a love that awakens jealousy and anger against those who seek to harm and hurt the loved son.

So Israel is designated as God’s first born son: something that will have implications for our understanding of Jesus as God’s Son. Later, in the Old Testament, we see that the title Son of God is applied to the Kings of Israel. In effect, the Kings, Saul, David, Solomon and so on act as the representative of Israel; when they are wise and good, Israel prospers: when they sin, Israel falls into sin and judgement comes. Psalm 2 is regarded as a royal Psalm written for the Kings of Israel. It says

He said to me “You are my Son. Today I have become your Father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron sceptre; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.” (Psalm 2:7b-9)

### **Something bigger going on**

Israel is presented as God’s Son in the Old Testament, but if you read Luke’s Gospel, then you will find a little surprise tucked away in the genealogy at the end of Luke 3. The genealogy starts with Jesus in 3:23 and traces his ancestry back through David (3:31), Judah (3:33), Jacob, Isaac and Abraham (3:34) and then back to Adam (3:38) and there we have it: Adam was “the Son of God.”

Being the Son of God is linked not just to a specific people group here, but to the human race. It captures the sense that we have our origins in God and that we are made in his image. We are sons by creation.

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<sup>16</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 27.

## **Even bigger still**

Then we get to Jesus, the one that the whole of Scripture is pointing towards (c.f. Romans 1:2-4). At the start of the Gospels, we find Jesus coming to be baptised in the River Jordan by his cousin, John. As he is baptised, something amazing happens:

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son. With you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11).

God the Father speaks and describes Jesus as His Son and declares his pleasure in him. This distinguishes Jesus out from the others coming to be baptised by John; they need to be baptised to mark their repentance from sin, but there is no fault found in Jesus. God is happy with him; He delights in him.

God's Words here echo the declaration of son-ship in Psalm 2, but also Isaiah 42:1 where God's servant is described as "my chosen one in whom I take delight." They also carry echoes of Genesis 22:2 where Abraham is told to take "your son, your only son whom you love" and sacrifice him.<sup>17</sup>

Later on in the New Testament, Paul describes Jesus as the firstborn. He is the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15) and the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18).

Jesus then is the "one and only Son" that God sent out of love for the World (John 3:16). Now, we can't help reflecting on the way that this title Son which is applied to Jesus has been first used to describe humanity in general and Israel in particular. Jesus then takes on the kingly role of representing Israel, just as Israel was meant to represent humanity. Jesus is a new Adam. Jesus as son of God represents us: here is a hint of his substitutionary role. His son-ship reflects his full humanity.

## **Similar but different**

But we would be mistaken to simply see Jesus as an even greater example of the human kings that represented Israel. No, there is something even greater still going on. John 3:16 describes Jesus as God's "one and only son." There is something unique about him, something that marks him out as a son in a way that is not applicable to Adam, Israel, King David or any of us.

Some Bible versions translate "one and only" as "begotten" and this is the sense that is captured in a number of the creeds: he was "begotten not made." This is a true father/ son relationship. Jesus is not part of creation, nor is he adopted into God's family. He is the Son by nature.

This son-ship is eternal. Adam becomes a son when he is created, Israel becomes a son when called to be God's people, kings like David become "sons" when they ascend to the throne. Jesus always has

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<sup>17</sup> On the Old Testament references and inferences see, RT France, *The Gospel of Mark* (New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids MI. Eerdmans, 2002), 80.

been, always is, always will be God's Son. John 1:1, using the title "The Word" to describe Jesus, tells us that, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

This is the point that Jesus makes in John 5:26: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." The phrase "life in himself" refers to self-existence. God does not owe his existence to anyone or anything else: he is self-sufficient. Only God has this quality and John tells us that both the Father and Son have this quality. In other words, Jesus is equal with God (John 5:18).

This was, of course, to become a bone of contention during the early stages of church history as people like Arius and Athanasius battled over the status and identity of Jesus. We will have a look at that in a bit more detail later. The two key things to note at the moment are, firstly, the unique role and status that Jesus has here which distinguishes him from all creatures. He is not just an exalted angel and certainly more than an ordinary man (c.f. Hebrews 1-2). John 1:1 identifies this Son as being God himself. Secondly, because Jesus is described as "The Word of God" in John 1:1 and "the image of the invisible God" in Colossians 1:15, he is the one who reveals to us what it is like. It is exactly because we see in Jesus God revealed as "Son" that we can know God as "Father" too (John 14:6-9.)

### **The obedient Son**

We have mentioned previously that this relationship of Father to Son is one based on love. This love is characterised by the generosity of a loving father who gives to his Son good gifts. Psalm 2, which is now applied to Christ, portrays the Father as giving his son an inheritance, namely lordship and rule over the nations. In John 6:39, we see that we are the inheritance given to Jesus the Son. We also see that God will give Christ victory over His cosmic enemies so that they are put under his feet, becoming his footstool (1 Corinthians 15:27).

Jesus' love for the father is marked out as sonly obedience. He is the one:

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death –even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:4-8)

This is the Son who, when everything is under his reign and rule, will himself submit to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28).

### **Father and Son working together**

In John's Gospel, the father-Son relationship is used to give us a sense of the unity of nature and purpose of the Trinity. First of all, Jesus declares that he and his Father are one. They are equal in nature. This is seen by the Jews as blasphemy and they want to stone him.

Secondly, Jesus tells us that together they share in the work of redemption.

The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. (John 5:19).

This is sometimes referred to as "Inseparable Operation." It means that the members of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, work completely together. We cannot divide up their work. It is not that



the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Holy Spirit sustains (hence one of the reasons why we cannot define the members of the Trinity by function). They don't each take responsibility for a different step in the process.

Of course, each person of the trinity brings his own part to bear. As Frame comments:

This is not to say that the three play identical roles in these events. The Father, not the Son, sent Jesus into the World to redeem his people; the Son, not the Father or the Spirit became incarnate to die on the cross for our sins.<sup>18</sup>

However, the Father, Son and Spirit are all involved in creation, the Incarnation, the Atonement together. This is also sometimes talked to in terms of "perichoresis" or the "mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity (John 10:38) so that wherever one of the persons of the Trinity is present, all are present."<sup>19</sup>

Frame notes that there is mutuality of love and of glory between the three persons of the Trinity. The Father and Son seek each other's glory. "To see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9) for he and the Father are one (10:30)."<sup>20</sup>

All that we have said explicitly here about the Father and the Son should also be said implicitly about the Spirit, so that "no text says precisely that the Father or the Son glorifies the Spirit, but the Father and the Son do honour the Spirit in his particular work."<sup>21</sup> Thus, just as the Father delights in the Son, so Jesus delights in the fact that the Spirit will come and do even greater works (John 14:12).<sup>22</sup>

### **Implications**

We will want to stop and draw breath at this point. The revelation of God as Father through the revelation of God as Son is so exciting and wonderful. This is the basis for saying that God is love. The Father and Son eternally love each other. Moreover, the Trinity gives us an insight into how loving relationships are meant to work. There is a reciprocated generosity<sup>23</sup> and there is a proper sense of exclusivity and jealousy that should be there in all family relationships, one that values the uniqueness of the relationship without becoming inward looking, controlling and destructive. We also note that relationships can be both equal in nature whilst being unequal in role. The Son is equal with the Father and yet willingly submits to him. This has fascinating implications for our understanding of family, church and work life too.

We will come back to some of these practical implications in more detail later, but first of all, we need to explore the Doctrine of the Trinity a little further.

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<sup>18</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 694.

<sup>19</sup> See John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 693-694.

<sup>20</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 694.

<sup>21</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 695.

<sup>22</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 695.

<sup>23</sup> See Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 35.

## 5. Another Helper

### Introduction

Whilst working through Mark's Gospel in early 2015 at Bearwood Chapel, we kept coming back to some questions that followed a theme: "What stops me?"

"What stops me from seeing God for who He is?"

"What stops me from worshipping?"

"What stops me from truly knowing God?"

"What stops me from trusting and taking God at His Word?"

"What stops me from hearing God speak?"

Well if we are going to know, worship and hear God then there's someone really vital that we need to talk about, The Holy Spirit. Failure to do so is to miss a vital part of the jigsaw. We end up saying theoretically that we believe in the Trinity but act as though we only believe in two of the persons.

### 1. Who is the Holy Spirit?

In John 14, Jesus tells his disciples that he must now leave them. This is during the Last Supper meal. It is close to the point when he will be betrayed and he is explaining that this is God's plan, he will be executed, rise from the dead and ascend back to Heaven to his Father. The news is distressing for the disciples. So he assures them that they will not be left alone (cf John 14:1-7 see also John 15:26-6:4). He tells them that when he goes, he will send "another" to be with them.

#### a. He is "another one" (John 14:16)

In other words, He is like Jesus –doing the same work. Just as the Son does the same work as the Father, so too, the Spirit does the same work as the Son. The Bigger Biblical picture is that like The Son, The Spirit is fully and equally God.<sup>24</sup>

#### b. He is another Paraclete (John 14:16)

The Greek Word "paraclete" has been translated variably as counsellor, encourager, comforter, advocate. The idea here is of one who comes alongside us, to be with us. Just as the advocate in the courtroom stands alongside the plaintiff, so the Holy Spirit comes alongside us to speak for us.<sup>25</sup> He does that before the Father, just as the Son intercedes for us, so too does the Spirit. When we pray, he is with us (Romans 8:26-27). He also does that before human accusers. Jesus told his disciples not to worry when they were dragged before secular and synagogue courts because the Holy Spirit would give them the Words to say (Matthew 10:19-20).

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<sup>24</sup> See DA Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC. Apollos. Nottingham, 1991), 500.

<sup>25</sup> Though note that the Greek meaning is not narrowly tied down to legal contexts. See Carson, *John*, 499.

Older Bible versions such as the King James Authorised Version prefer the word “comforter.” We may be tempted to think purely in soft terms here, someone who says soothing things to us. Well we should not underplay the loving gentleness of God and miss out on that aspect of comfort but in fact, the older usage of the word “comfort” has a stronger meaning, it has the idea of strengthening someone.<sup>26</sup>

- c. He is “The Spirit of truth” (John 14:17)

See here the contrasts with the lies and falsehood of the spirit of Anti-Christ that John talks about in 1 John 4. Paul also distinguishes between the Holy Spirit who brings truth and false, lying Spirits who bring error (1 Corinthians 12). The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus and so he speaks truthfully about his incarnation and crucifixion. False spirits dishonour Jesus and denounce him as cursed. In other words, the Holy Spirit points to the truth of the Gospel.

## **2. What does he do?**

- a. He convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgement – in other words, he will continue the work Jesus has done in revealing God’s plan (John 16:8-9)

He can do this because it is His World. The Spirit is eternally and fully God, the third person of the Trinity. So he was there at the beginning where he is described as hovering over creation (Genesis 1:1). Just as the Son was fully involved in creation so that nothing was made that wasn’t made through Him, so too the Spirit is creator. This is why it’s wrong to replace the names Father, Son and Spirit with Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. All three participated in the work of Creation.

Jesus told His disciples that when he returned to heaven, the Spirit would come and continue the work of convicting the World of its Sin. The World had rejected Jesus but they had not silenced God. The Holy Spirit would show them what righteousness was like and in showing them their sin and pointing to true righteousness, he would remind them of God’s righteous judgement (John 16:8).

- b. **He reveals Jesus and so he glorifies Jesus (John 16:12-15)**

Jesus told his disciples that he still had so much to teach them but that they could not bear this at that time. The Gospels show how much the disciples struggled to grasp what Jesus had to say to them. Things would only become clear on the other side of the Resurrection. So Jesus tells the disciples that one of the important things that the Holy spirit would do would be to reveal all truth to them, to complete God’s revelation.

So we can say three things about the Holy Spirit

- i. He is sent to be with us and to indwell us
- ii. He comes to bring revelation and conviction to the World
- iii. He comes to reveal the fullness of God’s truth to His people.

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<sup>26</sup>Carson, *John*, 499.

### 3. How does he do this?

Tim Hughes has written the song, "There must be more than this."<sup>27</sup> We have sung it sometimes in Church. Like most songs it has its strengths and weaknesses.

On the plus side, the phrase "There must be more than this" reminds us that we are not just here on our own, God is involved, God is present. It also challenges us because there's a right sense of hunger for each of us to know God more – to know God's truth, presence and power in our lives.

In other words, what we believe goes against the secular spirit of our age. Secularism erjects the Transcendent. It says that there isn't more than this. It's just us, here on our own. The human race is responsible for this World; there isn't a higher authority who we are accountable to. We must do our best for ourselves. Charles Taylor describes this as "disenchantment" and suggests that there is something more belongs to a lost world. As he writes about the history of secularism, he starts with a description of how pre-modern societies functioned and comments.

"I have been drawing a portrait of the world we have lost, one in which spiritual forces impinged on porous agents, in which the social was grounded in the sacred and secular time in higher times."<sup>28</sup>

So Secularism is one way in which Jesus' statement that this World does not know the Spirit because it cannot see him –or cannot see the reality of who he is and what is doing- is proved true.. However, we do know him because he is present with, among and in us (14:17).

Sadly though, even Christians can function as practical secularists. We may believe the theory that God is there but we act as though he is distant and not involved or interested in our daily lives.

I also said that there are some weaknesses with the song. Now, to be clear, I mean here that there are weaknesses in how we can understand it and what we can end up thinking as we sing it. I don't think that the author intended to convey these sentiments.

First of all, we can talk about "more than this" as though there's some inner circle within the church who have a special experience of God or a higher plain of Christian living that we need to get onto. At various times in history Christians have made the mistake of assuming that if they could have the right experience then they would make it up onto the higher plain, the top tier of Christian life, where they'd know God's presence and power in such a special way that they'd be free from suffering, always successful in witness and immune to temptation. It just does not work like that and the Bible teaches no such thing.

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<sup>27</sup> For Lyrics see [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/t/tim\\_hughes/consuming\\_fire.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/t/tim_hughes/consuming_fire.html) (accessed 20/03/2015).or listen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFPzUcQkmmg> (accessed 20/03/2015)

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 2007.

Secondly, if on the one extreme you have secularism which denies the Supernatural; on the other extreme you have superstition. Even in secular societies, people can spend their lives chasing mystical experiences, living in fear of fate putting their trust in magic rites and trying to contact the spirit world. And that's how a lot of religion operates. Sadly it's also how a lot of Christianity ends up functioning so that talk of the Holy Spirit ends up kind of spooky. By the way, at first, I was going to talk about Secularism denying the Transcendent and Superstition accepting it but I realised that superstition also denies Transcendence. Whilst it recognises that there are other things beyond physical matter, it focuses on a spirit world which is imminent and can be controlled and manipulated. This also begs the question as to what spirit it is that some Christians invoke if they see it as something controllable and biddable.

So it is important for us to have a clear understanding of how the Holy Spirit works and how He reveals God's character and God's purpose to us. He does this in two ways:

*a. Inspiration*

The Holy Spirit is the one that reveals God's truth. In John 14, the specific focus is on the disciples who will be led into all truth. –in other words, the Holy Spirit will enable or inspire them write Scripture. He will enable them to remember accurately all that Jesus said and did. He will reveal to them things that Jesus had not told them yet. This is why Paul was able to write that all of Scripture is God breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Now, remember that when Paul wrote this, he set his description of Scripture in the same context of a church seeking to live godly lives and facing persecution. as Jesus sets the sending of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Scripture's role in encouraging, revealing and convicting is set in exactly the same context as the Holy Spirit's role of encouraging, revealing and convicting. Note also that when Scripture does all these things then it is sufficient because it makes us complete.

*b. Illumination*

The Holy Spirit indwells us and helps to recognise, understand and believe God's Word. This involves that sense in my heart as Scripture is read and then as it's preached, as we pray about it, as we sing about it that it is speaking personally to me. We could say that the lights go on! I don't just intellectually respond to what I hear but I have a sense of conviction and it moves me to act.

I want to suggest three implications to this:

- a. The Holy Spirit is at work in our meetings as we are taught God's Word and through the week as he brings Scripture to mind or helps us to study it, understand it and apply it. That's why healthy churches need to take the regular, expository teaching of Scripture seriously and place it central to the life of the Church.
- b. The Holy Spirit is at work through us to speak to the World as we proclaim the Gospel to others. By the way, this rules out neat little catchphrases such as "witness and where necessary use words." Words are always necessary!

- c. The Holy Spirit guides us in our decision making. In Acts it talks we find the church deciding something because it seemed good to them and to the Holy Spirit. There's an aim to understand the mind of the Spirit on something important.

### *How does guidance work?*

So how do we seek God's guidance? How do we make decisions whilst avoiding the twin dangers of secularism and superstition? Let me give two examples. The first is about corporate church life and the second about individual pastoral situations.

A few years ago, our church had to make some big decisions. These included whether or not to plant a new congregation and whether to purchase a nearby building for use as a community.

How could we have approached these decisions? Well one way that some of us may have experiences is for a church leader or prominent person to stand up and announces that the Holy Spirit has told them that we must do this. Some of us might find it easier if we operate like that. We hope for "a word" that will confirm what we should do.

When we made the decision about the café and the new congregation as leaders we refused to go down that line. Why? Well because something like that ends up in bullying and manipulation, it tends to trump any wisdom, insight or discernment that others might bring to bear. We cannot question the decision because it has been announced as God's will on the matter.

Instead what we did was that:

- a. We prayed about things together
- b. We looked at what Scripture had to say. Of course Scripture does not tell us whether we should buy shops or start another service but it does call us to seek God's glory and to be witnesses. Also, we saw in Scripture some principles about life, growth and multiplication. So the proposals were in line with those principles. I guess that set the parameters for discussion as well. If we decided not to do something then we had to look at the alternatives and see how they would contribute to Gospel growth.
- c. We listened to practical wisdom. This included valuable insights about why we needed to act such as that newcomers will see a church as full even when there are seats spare once you hit 80% of your capacity and that our main building is set back from the road down a long drive which creates a psychological barrier to vulnerable people coming down and asking for help. We consulted people who had done similar things. We identified the risks associated and we quantified them
- d. But we also took time to get a sense of the mood. We listened to how people felt, some were excited and described how they felt that God was encouraging them about these things. Others were apprehensive or unsettled. We listened to all sides. Incidentally, just because we did go ahead did not mean that we hadn't listened to those who were apprehensive. We took all facts and feelings into account but in the end a decision had to be made. Concerns raised shaped the way we went forward

Do you see what was happening?

- a. We were acting under the authority of Scripture
- b. The Holy Spirit was at work giving us all the gifts we needed to be able to honour and glorify God in our decision making.

Now this is both very practical and very spiritual –because you cannot separate the two. The Holy Spirit works through the insights of the architect and the accountant!

It also felt very risky. It was quite nerve racking for the elders. We're not in the habit of sticking decisions in front of the Church because we felt like it. We were convinced that this was the right thing to do, that it was necessary and that it was urgent. So there were times when we thought "what if the church makes the wrong decision?" There was also a few moments when I did think "what if we have made the wrong decision?"

Now these factors come into play with pastoral care, one to one conversations and individual or family decisions too. In some circles, it is regularly the case that someone will go to another believer and announce that they've been given a word for them. Sometimes it's simply to encourage them that they are loved and welcomed and that's fair enough. But sometimes it's to tell them about an aspect of their life and to insist that there's something they should do.

I don't think that this is a healthy approach to Church life and I don't think it really is especially super spiritual. Again, such an approach opens the door to manipulation and to abuse.

There have been times when I could have told someone in advance what they were going to say and I could have predicted what they would do. Actually much of that goes from simply listening, observing and being aware through experience of how people tend to live their lives.

To have announced all this in advance would potentially have given me a lot of power and control over the individuals concerned but would it have really got them to hear what God had to say? I think not. It would have turned their eyes from God and Scripture to me as a sort of guru and it would have shut down their discernment.

But then in conversation, I don't simply seek to give my own advice or the wisdom of some psychologist or even a Christian expert. Rather, my desire is that together we will find out what God has to say. This of course means that together we go to Scripture and prepare for God's Word to disagree with us, challenge us, encourage us, rebuke us and change us.

Now, there's a danger for us when this is the approach taken (both in the corporate and the personal examples). Because there isn't the high drama, we can end up behaving like secularists. We can assume that it's just us making decisions with all feelings and opinions equally valid. But there is truth in those circumstances, the Holy Spirit is working and so if we resist and rebel it is still grievous sin.

What I mean by this is not that you must therefore agree with the proposal but:

- a. We will want to approach decision making with the right motives and the right overarching principles. If we disagree then we must ensure that our reasons are Gospel reasons and that we are not driven by fear, jealousy, resentment or selfishness.
- b. If the decision seems to go against us then we will respond with generosity of spirit. We won't simply flounce off and take our bat home. Now sometimes a decision takes a church in such a significant direction of travel that we recognise that we simply would not be able to continue without it being detrimental to the body and that it's time to change. I think that such situations are very rare and it's important that they are handled graciously. Sometimes it will mean that we prayerfully support what is happening. We wish it well. Often it means that we roll our sleeves up and get involved to ensure that the decision works.

## **Conclusion**

God has sent his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work among us now as we are gathered together with Scripture open.

What's He saying?

- a. To some of us he is convicting us of sin, righteousness and judgement –we've been going along to church events, watching and listening. Now, Holy spirit is saying that it's time to join the family.
- b. For all of us who are part of God's Family, there's the encouragement that God is with us through his Holy Spirit, to teach, encourage and empower us.
- c. There's a call here. Will you let the Holy Spirit work through you to speak to others about the good news?



## 6. What the Bible tells us about the Trinity

### Is the Trinity Biblical?

“The Trinity is just made up. The word doesn’t even exist in the Bible.” Down through history, this has been the great objection raised against orthodox Christian belief. In modern times, the Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular have argued vehemently that the whole idea owes more to pagan religion and philosophy than it does to Biblical teaching.

We have argued from the start that what we believe affects how we live. If our faith is based on a lie, then our whole lives will be shipwrecked with no sense of purpose or direction. If we believe a lie, then we commit idolatry and worship a false god.

So, at this stage, we are going to take a little time to provide a summary of what the Bible teaches about God as Trinity. Of course, if you go looking for the word, then you won’t find it, but what we will argue is that the word ‘Trinity’ sums up the whole Biblical teaching that in God we see two aspects. First of all, the Bible presents God’s oneness and unity – the one true God who is without rivals. Secondly, the Bible presents plurality and diversity within this one God so that we talk about God as being One God existing as three persons.

### Oneness of God – monotheism – without rivalry

The key Old Testament text is Deuteronomy 6:4 which says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one.” This is sometimes called “The Shema” and it is still recited as the Jewish call to worship to this day.

God reveals himself by the name Yahweh – it has the idea of self-existence and also is associated with God as deliverer. It is Yahweh who rescues the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brings them into the Promised Land.<sup>29</sup> They are to worship him and him only. They are not to worship other living beings; they are not to make images and worship them.<sup>30</sup>

Loyal worship is not about religious observance or even obedience. When the people are told to hear and remember that there is only one God, they are told to love him whole heartedly (heart, mind, soul).<sup>31</sup> In fact, this is seen as the command which sums up the law and is described both by Jesus and his opponents, the teachers of the Law as the first and most important commandment. The command to love others (your neighbour as yourself) flows out implicitly from this as the second commandment.<sup>32</sup> So, when we talk about the oneness of God, we are back at love again. His oneness commands an exclusive, faithful love. Of course, this begs the question of what sort of God can legitimately demand our love: surely it is the God who loves us, the God who is love?

As Mike Reeves says:

“If salvation simply means him letting me off, and counting me as a law abiding citizen then gratitude (not love) is all I have. In other words, I can never really love the God who is

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<sup>29</sup> Exodus 3:14 and 6:3.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 20:2-6 and Deuteronomy 5:7-10.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Luke 10:27.

essentially just 'The Ruler.' And that ironically means I can never keep the greatest commandment: to love the Lord my God."<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament, this keeps coming up. God is the one who commands Israel's worship and obedience. He is the one they are to trust in and to rely on. Yet so often they choose to worship idols. Now if, at times, the love relationship is presented in terms of Father and Son, the other relationship image that the Old Testament uses is that of husband and wife. God is the one who calls Israel as his bride. This is a unique and significant image: the Canaanite religions around Israel had male gods with female goddesses as their consorts, but in the Bible, Yahweh's consort is his people. Monotheism upholds a high view of humanity as central to a good creation.

Sadly, Israel does not act faithfully and is likened to a prostitute who leaves her husband for other men. This provides a graphic image of idolatry. Of course, sexual immorality often had a literal part to play in pagan shrine rituals.<sup>34</sup>

God's oneness tells us about his unique power and glory. Deuteronomy 32:39 says "See now that I am He! There is no god besides me."<sup>35</sup> Yahweh is the one who will share his glory with no other god (See the repeated refrain in Isaiah 43:11; 44:6; 44:24; 45:5-6; 45:18; 45:22; 46:9). Here again is a reminder of God's self-sufficiency. He acts for his own name's sake and his own glory (Isaiah 42:8; 42:11; 48:9-11). Whilst monotheism provides a high view of humanity – and whisper it quietly but, whilst God will not share his glory with other gods, he makes us in his image so that sin is a falling short of and an exchange of his glory – monotheism prevents us from the hubris of thinking that all revolves around us.<sup>36</sup>

This raises a vital question when trying to understand who Jesus is. Does he compete with God as a rival for power and glory or does he share in it?

Now, some historians and OT scholars have suggested that the ancient Israelites were not so much monotheists as henotheists. They argue that they saw Yahweh as dominant among and over the gods – that he commanded their worship, but that the other gods were seen as real gods who were at least potential rivals (see e.g. Ex 15:11; Judges 11:24)

I think this is to miss a couple of points.

- a. That in OT literature, false gods may well at times be personified, but that is not to suggest that the writers always thought of the gods as real
- b. That it is possible to see (as Paul does in the NT) a real connection between spiritual beings (i.e. demons) and idols. These beings may have some power making them a type of god but it does not mean that they are of the same nature as the one true God.

The latter point means that some of the beings mentioned may exist as actual powers and authorities and not just in the imaginations of the idol makers and worshippers. As Frame notes

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<sup>33</sup> Reeves, *The Good God*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> This the theme through the book of Hosea, see also Ezekiel 16.

<sup>35</sup> On this see, John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 623.

<sup>36</sup> For more on this point and especially the significance of the Isaiah passages, see John Piper, *Desiring God* (Leicester, IVP, 1986).

“The actual ontological status of these ‘gods’ is not always clear. Does Chemosh actually exist according to Judges 11:24? Or is Jephthah speaking ironically or by way of concession to the Ammonite way of thinking? When Elijah challenges the Priests of Baal on Mount Carmel he refers to Baal sarcastically.”<sup>37</sup>

However, the issue isn’t about whether these beings exist and are worshipped as gods.

“If the doctrine of God’s oneness means that only one being has ever been called God, or that only one being has ever been worshipped, then of course it is false...But, as we have seen, the numerical oneness of God is also a qualitative oneness: there is only one supreme being and therefore only one being who deserves worship.”<sup>38</sup>

So the point is that for all the apparent power and knowledge that such beings might have and for all the worship and attention they attract, only Yahweh is truly God, all powerful, all knowing and worthy of worship.

I think that one of the mistaken assumptions found here is that religion has evolved so that monotheism is the pinnacle of progress from many gods representing different characteristics and looking after different territories to one uber-God who contains all the characteristics we look for in our gods and rules the Universe. In fact, if those who argue this are honest, they see the true pinnacle in the next step from having one God to no gods (Atheism). But it’s strange isn’t it that we keep assuming theoretical progress when normally what we see in cultures, societies and organisms over time is decline and decay. Isn’t it at least equally likely (if not even more so) that religion has moved from the simplicity of one God to the complexity of many gods.

The assumption misses the point as well that the Bible draws the line in a different place to where students of religion tend to – not between spiritual and natural, but between the Creator and the created. These other beings may be spiritual, may have power and influence, but they are creatures. In the Beginning, God created the Heavens and the earth and so all beings “seen and unseen,” gods, angels, animals and humans were made by Him.

This means that when we look at Jesus and the Spirit, then the important question to ask is “What side of the line do they come?”

So this is the one God of Scripture and that part of the survey may seem to be obvious and uncontroversial. However, it is important to start with this because we are obliged to ask “one of what” and “in what ways is he one?” This is not simply a mathematical exercise, but concerned with God’s revelation of his own character. Even at this stage, we may want to draw a sharp distinction between the one true God of the Bible who is love and the “one god” of other religions who is unable to be all the very things that make God unique and without rival because those gods are not Triune.

It’s also worth mentioning at this point an additional significance which we will come to later – the Shema provides the very basis for Paul (a Jew) to describe the work of Christ and the Spirit –somehow they fit into this oneness rather than competing with or destroying it.

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<sup>37</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 626

<sup>38</sup> John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 626.

## Plurality within the Godhead

Whilst the major theme of the Old Testament is God's oneness, commentators have noticed throughout the OT a number of hints and nods towards plurality within the godhead. For example, in Genesis 1:26, God says "let us make him in our image." In Genesis 6:7, God says "Let us go down."

There are other possible interpretations here if we take these verses on their own. For example, it is possible God is addressing the heavenly host of angels.<sup>39</sup> However, it can't be right given his desire to make humans in "our image."<sup>40</sup>

It has also been suggested that plurality is used here not to count numbers, but to emphasise God's greatest and majesty – a similar technique is seen when God is referred to as Elohim with the "ohim" bit tending to signify plurality in the OT, but Elohim so clearly in many contexts refers to one being.<sup>41</sup>

However, we can't just take those verses on their own. We need to read them as part of the whole unfolding revelation. For example, we have the theophany incidents where God appears to the patriarchs. Often, as well, there is an interesting overlap because the patriarchs and Old Testament at some points talk about seeing the angel of the Lord and at others as seeing the Lord himself (See e.g. Genesis 16; Genesis 21:17-18; Judges 6:20 & 23).<sup>42</sup> In Genesis 18, Abraham has one such encounter where three men come to meet and talk with him.<sup>43</sup>

Then we have some of the Psalms which seem to describe a highly exalted and powerful figure. In Psalm 8, we have man who is for a while made lower than the angels but one day will be exalted to a position of extreme power and authority. In Psalm 110, God acts to favour the Psalmist's master. Who exactly is this master? Well, note two things. First, the Psalm is written by David, the King. In human terms, David was the top dog: he served no other master. Israel at that time was free from outside dominion. Secondly, there's some incredible word play when we hear the Psalm read or read an English translation. The original Hebrew tells us that "Yahweh says to my Lord, sit at my right hand." (Psalm 110:1). Except that it would never be read aloud like that because the name of God was never pronounced out loud. Instead the word "Lord" was substituted for Yahweh so that our translations read "The Lord said to my Lord..." There is someone who is David's Lord, who is highly exalted and yet is differentiated from The Lord.

These are tantalising hints of what is to come in the New Testament when we will see these Psalms applied to Jesus. Hebrews applies Psalm 8 to Jesus as the one who fulfils God's promises and becomes the mediator between God and Man (Hebrews 2:5-9). No other human being is declared Lord and invited to reign at God's right hand – no other human being is told "Today you are my Son."<sup>44</sup>

Then, in Daniel 9, we have the vivid image of one who looks like the Ancient of Days and coming towards him in the clouds is one like a son of man – someone with human appearance, distinct from

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon Wenham, Genesis 1-11 (WBC 1. Columbia, 1987), 27-28.

<sup>40</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 19-20.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon Wenham, Genesis 1-11 (WBC 1. Columbia, 1987), 27-28.

<sup>42</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> See Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> See Acts 2:34 and Hebrews 1:5-13)

the Ancient of Days but clearly exalted and bearing cosmic power. As with the Psalms, these verses are taken up and applied to Jesus in the NT so he himself takes up the title “Son of Man” for himself.

### **The New Testament Shema One God in Three Persons**

As mentioned earlier, in his letters, Paul does something incredible: he uses the Shema to show how God can be both one and three. He takes the liturgy of Ancient Israel and draws Jesus (God the Son) and The Holy Spirit into it. For example, in Ephesians 4 v 3-6 we are told to

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit –just as you were called to one hope- when you were called- one Lord, one faith –one baptism; one God and Father of all who is over all and through all.

The repeated statement “There is one” echoes Deuteronomy 6, but here a number of things are emphasised. “There is one Spirit” and this Spirit is the basis of our unity, “one God and Father” and “one Lord.” The latter refers to Christ who takes on the title of Lord in the NT. As we saw earlier, ‘Lord’ can simply be a reference to a human master, but throughout the OT, it is used in lieu of the name Yahweh. When Paul tells us that “Jesus Christ is Lord,” we are meant to sit up and take notice.

Now the Ephesians verses also talk about one faith, baptism and hope, so simply being included in the list is not proof of divinity. However, in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, Paul is even more explicit. Here he is talking about whether it is okay to offer food to idols and notes that idols are nothing because there is only one god (1 Corinthians 8:4). Then he says,

For even if there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.” (1 Cor 8:5-6)

Do you see what happens here? Paul echoes the Shema. “There is one God.” This is the creator God. All was made (has its origin in him) and belongs to Him or exists in Him. This true God is distinguished from false gods and lords. Yet within the Shema, something radical and explosive has happened. The Lord Jesus Christ has been included in that contrast against idolatry. NT Wright says,

The real shock of the passage is of course simply the expansion of the Shema to include Jesus within it. The fact that Paul can do what he has done here in verse 6 without explanation or justification, speaks volumes for the theological revolution that has already taken place.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, whilst there were many points that Paul had to explain, argue and prove, this is something he can simply state as evidence knowing that it will be widely accepted. The church was already proclaiming an exalted position for Jesus.

Now I do have one small quibble with Wright’s phraseology here. No Jew would presume to add to the Godhead – this would itself be idolatry and I doubt Wright would want us to think in those terms either, so when we talk here about Christ being included, it is not that something has been added to

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<sup>45</sup> NT Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London, SPCK, 2013), 665.

the equation. Rather, it is as though Paul has put the Shema under a microscope so that we can see the detail and realise that the Son has always been included within the one.

### **No Rivals**

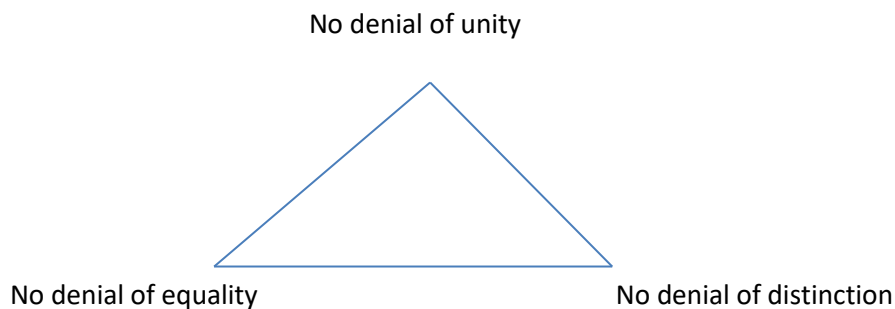
The overall Bible picture presents us with a God who is at the same time “One” and yet “plural” (three). The Trinity shows us how it is possible for there to be one God without any risk or possibility of rivalry. The Son and the Spirit are included within our definition of God and as we have seen before, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in purpose and will so that there is an eternal oneness and unity to them which is unbreakable.

## 7. Why what we think about the Trinity matters

We've kept emphasising that what we believe about God matters. When we talk about the Trinity, we are not just in the business of theological formulations and intellectual arguments. This stuff matters practically for our daily lives and our eternal assurance.

### Three things that matter: What we can and can't say about the Trinity

My doctrine lecturer Mike Ovey, principal at Oak Hill, used to suggest that there are three things that Christians should never deny about the Trinity



We have seen these three things as we have explored the Biblical teaching on the Trinity. Often confusion has occurred in history where one of these has been pushed at the expense of the rest.

### Denying distinction

For example, we want to emphasise the unity of God. We have seen how we take our cue for this from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6. Affirming the unity and oneness of God protects us from thinking of God as having rivals. It honours his sovereignty. It stops us from thinking in terms of polytheism. There is not more than one God.

But what happens when we focus so heavily on this at the expense of the other two criteria? Well, one thing we can end up with is something called Modalism.

Throughout history, some theologians have tried to account for why the Bible talks about the Father, Son and Spirit whilst refusing to accept that there are different persons.

Modalists believe that God simply appears in different modes. Sometimes he appears as the Father, sometimes as the Son and sometimes as the Spirit.<sup>46</sup> They even try to associate these modes with different phases in history – God the Father creates, The Son redeems and the Spirit sustains and sanctifies. One specific historical example of this was Sabellianism.

“Sabellians held that the only God, the Father in the OT, had become the Son in the NT, and sanctified the church as the Holy Spirit of Pentecost.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 108.

Some attempts at illustrations to explain the Trinity fall into this trap. For example, the illustration is often used of water appearing sometimes as ice and sometimes as steam. Such illustrations demonstrate the oneness of the Trinity, but lose the distinction between the persons.

Why does this matter? Well, there are two big problems with modalism. First of all, we are once again left with a God who is not eternally love. Relationships are not an essential part of his character.

Secondly, this type of God is not really knowable. In effect, his true essence is hidden behind the modes which he presents to us. If the Father, Son and Spirit are only means by which God reveals himself at different times, then they are not true and full representations of Him. Ovey likens this to the puppet master who hides behind a screen whilst we only see the different puppets which he controls from the background.

So as Letham sums up:

“With modalism, God’s revelation in human history as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit does not reveal who he is eternally, and so we have no true knowledge of God.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Denying Equality**

Now, some people wanted to protect the status of Jesus as a real, supernatural person, but they still could not bring themselves to describe Jesus as fully God. They too wanted to protect the oneness of God whilst allowing for distinction between the persons. So they talked about Jesus as being a lesser being, having divine qualities, but subordinate to the Father. The most famous example of this was Arianism.

Arius was a presbyter in Alexandria, in Egypt. In 318AD, he confronted his bishop Alexander over perceived false teaching. The account goes that:

“Alexander (Bishop of Alexandria) attempted one day, in the presence of the presbyters and the rest of his clergy, too ambitious a discourse about the holy Trinity.... Arius, one of the presbyters under his jurisdiction, a man possessed of no inconsiderable logical acumen, thinking that the bishop was introducing the doctrine of Sabellius the Libyan, from love of controversy advanced another view diametrically opposed to the opinion of the Libyan.”<sup>49</sup>

Arius rightly wanted to confront the apparent modalism in Alexander’s teaching, but he fell into an equally dangerous trap. Alexander himself explains about Arius and his followers:

“They assert ‘God was not always a father, but that there was when he was not a father; the word of God was not from eternity, but was made out of nothing; for that ever existing God has made him who did not previously exist, out of the non-existent’ Wherefore ‘there was when he was not.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 108.

<sup>49</sup> A New Eusebius, 321.

<sup>50</sup> A New Eusebius, 323.



He goes on,

“they taught that ‘the Son is a creature and a work; he is neither like the father in essence, nor is by nature either the Father’s true word or his true Wisdom, but indeed one of his works and creatures.”<sup>51</sup>

In his own words, Arius writing to Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia C320 explains:

“The Son is not unbegotten.”<sup>52</sup>

In other words, Jesus was a special and exalted angelical/godlike being, but he was created. When was he created? Well, it wasn’t as part of the creation of the Universe, but nor was Jesus eternal. So Arians were left with a slightly ambiguous description of Jesus’s origins, “*en hote pote ouk en*” or, in English “there was a when, when he was not.”

The Arian controversy rocked and threatened to divide the church. In fact, it was one of the major issues that led to the Council of Nicea when church leaders from all over the Roman Empire met together to thrash out different issues and controversies. The Council formulated the following Creed.

“We believe in one God, Father Almighty maker of all things, seen and unseen:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only begotten of the Father, that is of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say ‘There was a time when he did not exist, and ‘Before being begotten he did not exist,’ and that he came into being from non-existence, or who allege that the Son of God is of another hypostasis or ousia, or who is alterable or changeable, these the Catholic and Apostolic church condemns.”<sup>53</sup>

The Creed makes it very clear that the Church disagreed with Arius. The Council concluded that it is wrong to suggest that there was a time when Jesus did not exist because he is fully God, he has the same substance and that means there is unity and equality to Father, Son and Holy Spirit without confusing them into one person.

Unfortunately, that didn’t settle the matter and the debate rumbled on for many years with sometimes one side having the upper hand and sometimes the other. A key figure in responding to Arius and his followers was Athanasius (296-393AD), a church leader who was also based in Alexandria. His stand against Arian teaching put him in great danger and he was exiled five times because of his robust defence of the Trinity.

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<sup>51</sup> A New Eusebius, 323.

<sup>52</sup> A New Eusebius, 325.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 116.

Here are two important things he tells us:

- a. The Father and Son revelation is a vital truth

In his own words, he says:

“But when we call God Father, at once with the Father we signify the Son’s existence. Therefore also he who believes in the Son, believes also in the Father: for he believes in what is proper to the Father’s Essence; and thus the faith is one in one God. And he who worships and honours the Son, in the Son worships and honours the Father; for one is the Godhead; and therefore one the honour and one the worship which is paid to the Father in and through the Son.”<sup>54</sup>

This comes back to what we have seen earlier. The Trinitarian revelation of Father and Son is vital. If we are to honour the Father truly for who He is then we must worship Him as the Eternal Father. When we deny the deity of Jesus then not only do we dishonour Jesus but we take away something from the eternal and essential nature of God the Father.

- b. The doctrine of the Trinity is vital to the doctrine of Salvation

Or as Athanasius puts it (and I’ve chosen to quote him at length here):

“For it was absurd that, having spoken, God should lie, in that he had established a that men would die by death if he were to transgress the commandment, and man did not die after he had transgressed, but God’s word was made void. For God would not have been truthful, if after he had said we would die, man had not died. And furthermore, it would have been improper that what had once been created rational and had partaken of his Word, should perish and return again to non-existence through corruption. For it would not have been worthy of the goodness of God that what had been brought into existence by him should be corrupted on account of the deceit which the devil had played on men. And it would have been especially improper that the handiwork of God in mankind should come to nought, either through their neglect, or through the deceit of demons.”<sup>55</sup>

Here he is insisting that God could not leave sin undealt with. The dilemma is this: if God overlooks sin in his mercy then He has lied, death has not come as a result of sin. God cannot break his word. However if God simply judged sin by bringing death to humanity then creation has failed and God’s plan has been thwarted.

So, Athanasius says,

“But as this had to be, so again on the other hand lies opposed to it what was reasonable for God, that he should appear truthful in passing the law about death. For it would have been absurd that for our benefit and permanence God, the Father of truth, should appear a liar.”

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<sup>54</sup> Athanasius, “Orations Against the Arians 111,” XXIII, 5, 862-863.

<sup>55</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, s6, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, s7, 149-151.

The result is the incarnation:

“For this reason the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God came to our realm; ... And lest what had been created should perish and the work of the Father among men should be in vain, he took to himself a body, and that not foreign to our own. For he did not wish simply to be in a body, nor did he wish merely to appear, for if he had wished only to appear he could have made his theophany through some other means.”<sup>57</sup>

In other words

1. God’s plan for his creation cannot be frustrated
2. God’s Word – his law of death – cannot fail to come true
3. So God must act

The fitting thing to happen was for God himself to come as a man, live among us and take the penalty on himself. This means that Jesus is fully God and fully man. In him, we see God taking the initiative to rescue his creatures and Man bearing the just penalty for sin.

### **A contemporary version of the same error**

Modern day Jehovah’s Witnesses follow in Arius’ footsteps this even leads to them translating the Bible differently. For example, the New Word Translation of John 1:1 which reads:

“In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was a god.”<sup>58</sup>

There are two problems with this. First of all, there’s a misunderstanding of Greek grammar. In English, we know whether or not something should carry the definite article (The) implying uniqueness or whether it carries the indefinite article (a) suggesting that it is potentially one of many within a category. In Greek, things are slightly harder because you only have the definite article. There isn’t a Greek equivalent of “a”. So when the JW’s came to John 1:1, they found that the text sometimes had the definite article and sometimes it didn’t.

It looked roughly something like this

“In the beginning was THE Word  
and The Word was with THE God  
and the Word was God”

The last use of “God” lacks the definite article and the translators of the New World Translation decided that it should be translated as

“...THE Word was A god.”

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<sup>57</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, s8, 152-153.

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/bible/nwt/books/john/1/> (cited 30/01/2015).

In other words, Jesus was presented as just one god, here taken to refer to a supernatural being such as an angel but one among many beings, not the one true Creator God, YHWH.

Now, here's the thing. It is true that when something lacks the definite article in Greek that it may be because it is indefinite and so we should add "a" or "an," but that isn't always so.

One such example is when you have something called "the predicate nominative," in other words when a phrase does not have a subject and an object but two nominative nouns<sup>59</sup> joined by the verb "to be."<sup>60</sup> John 1:1 is a good example of this. Others include: John 4:24; Hebrews 1:10 and Mark 2:28.<sup>61</sup>

In such cases, the use of the articular helps us to follow the logical order of the sentence. This can be very important.<sup>62</sup> In our case, it enables us to say "The Word was God" but not "God was the Word" because the latter would imply that Jesus is not just fully God but that he is the whole or sum total of God.<sup>63</sup> We would lose that distinction between the persons again.

In fact, the grammar here helps us to distinguish carefully between God – describing the Triune God – and "God" – describing one of the persons within the Trinity. Carson puts it this way:

"In fact, if John had included the article he would have been saying something quite untrue. He would have been so identifying the Word with God that no divine being could exist apart from the Word."<sup>64</sup>

Now, here's the second problem. Read on in John 1 and you discover that The Word is described as the one through whom all things were made. We are told that nothing was made without him (John 1:3). Now this is very important because there can only be two categories

- a. Created things
- b. Uncreated things

In the first category is everything that has been made. In the second, there's only God. Jesus is put firmly in the second category. He is not created; he is creator. In other words, he is God – the one to whom we owe our life. There isn't a category in between.

### **Why it matters that we don't deny the equality of the persons**

The reason that this is so important is that if Jesus is less than fully God, then this throws into question the whole atonement. Instead of God himself stepping down into history to save us, we have God at a distance who in effect throws another of his creatures to the wolves. Is such a God loving and would such a sacrifice be effective? The answer to these two questions is obviously "no." This was the conclusion that Athanasius came to all those years ago: that it was necessary and fitting

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<sup>59</sup> A subject-object sentence has a one thing (the subject or nominative) doing something to something else (the object). Here we have two nominatives related to each other by an equative verb.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel B Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 40.

<sup>61</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 43

<sup>62</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 43

<sup>63</sup> In the same way that 1 John 4:8 tells us that God is love but not that Love is God.

<sup>64</sup> DA Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Nottingham. Apollos, 1991), 117.

for God to come and live among us as a man. Without the Trinity, there is no incarnation; without the Incarnation, there is no cross; without the Cross ,there is no forgiveness of Sin and no resurrection and without the resurrection we have no hope (1 Corinthians 15).

## 8. Trinity Applied

We've already seen something of how important the Doctrine of the Trinity is. It points us clearly to God's character as the God who is love and it is essential to our understanding of salvation. We now want to pick up on one or two other practical applications.

### Unity and Diversity

What type of Universe would a God who is both one and three create? The answer is this: one that displays both unity and diversity. We would expect to see order, structure and unity. This order would enable us to analyse and understand the world around us. The unity of a creation made by one God (a Universe) will enable us to see connections between things and facts. We may even be able to develop a "theory of everything." Scientists and Engineers will find themselves at home in this world made by the Triune God.

However, a Universe that is made by the Triune God will also be characterised diversity as it reflects something of his character. So, it is no surprise to see variety and diversity within creation. As well as order, we expect to see creativity including the flourishing of languages, poetry, music, dance, sculpture and painting. Artists, poets and musicians will also find themselves at home in this world made by the Triune God.

By contrast, if we have many gods, rivalling each other, plotting, conniving and fighting, then what would we expect to see? Well, as a starting point, look at some of the ancient creation myths and you get some clues. In those myths, there isn't a purpose to creation. Creation and humanity are almost incidental and really accidental. They are just the by-products of the battles between divine factions. A world without one true and sovereign God is a world without unity, order, structure and purpose. It is an unintelligible and frightening place.

But what about a world created by a monist god, a God who is not one God in three persons? Well, such a world has no place for diversity. Think of a world without variety where everything has to conform exactly to the one pattern. What place would such a Universe have for creativity? What would its art and music look like?

So the Creation we have is one that you would expect if made by a Triune God. It reflects even if "faintly" the Unity and Diversity that we see "absolutely" in the Godhead.<sup>65</sup> Letham puts it this way:

"In short, this God who made the universe – establishing an order with a vast range of variety, with human beings as the crown of his creation, representing him as his image bearers – is relational. Communion and communication are inherent in his very being."<sup>66</sup>

In fact, Letham notes signs of Trinitarianism in the content of Creation, but also in the manner by which God creates:

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<sup>65</sup> CF Bavick, *The Doctrine of God*, 331.

<sup>66</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 21.

God “forms the earth in a threefold manner. First he issues direct fiats. He says ‘Let there be light’ ... Second he works. He separates light from darkness....However, there is also a third way of formation, in which God uses the activity of the creatures themselves. God commands the earth to produce vegetation...He commands the earth to bring forth land animals.”<sup>67</sup>

So he comments:

“Thus God who created the universe does not work in a monolithic way. His order is varied –it is threefold but one.”<sup>68</sup>

There are probably some implications for politics and leadership structures as well aren’t there? How can churches have genuinely plural and genuinely equal leadership teams? Perhaps it’s because they’re – even if so imperfectly – modelling something of this unity and diversity. By contrast, without the Trinity, we must either choose between totalitarianism (from religious and political leaders) and factionalism, leading to anarchy.<sup>69</sup>

### **Relationships Masterclass**

How do we relate to other people in church, the home and the workplace? Both Peter and Paul in their letters talk about submitting. Paul tells us that we are all to submit to one another, including wives to husbands, children to parents and slaves to masters. Peter also instructs his readers to submit. This includes submission to the civil authorities.

Such instructions don’t tend to go down well with modern audiences, proving unpopular and sounding outdated to our egalitarian ears. If we are all equal, then why should anyone submit to anyone?

Without getting into a detailed investigation of what Paul means in Ephesians 5,<sup>70</sup> we may still note that what we’ve learnt about the Trinity can help us understand how relationships are meant to work.

Paul puts it so succinctly in Philippians 2:8

“Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.

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<sup>67</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Philipsburg, NJ.: P&R Publishing, 2004), 18. We might also note that God’s revelation is also direct speech, works/signs and through human intermediaries

<sup>68</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> When thinking through this issue of Unity and Diversity with its implications for culture and politics I’m particularly grateful to Dan Strange who first drew my attention to this in a lecture on Contemporary Culture at Oak Hill Theological College.

<sup>70</sup> For those interested, see my MTH Dissertation, *Marriage at Work* (Oak Hill College, London, 2010), available on request.

When he appeared in human form,<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross."<sup>71</sup>

In Jesus, we see the one who is fully God, equal with the Father in nature but who willingly submits to the Father. Even this point has proven controversial as people have tried to work out exactly in what sense we can talk about the Son submitting. Some people have talked about the Son as "equal in nature but subordinate in role".<sup>72</sup> Others balk at this, seeing even that type of phraseology as suggesting the subordinationism that proved so poisonous in Arius' and Athanasius' day. However, we cannot ignore the point that the Son willingly submits to and obeys His Father. He does so without in any way denying the unity and equality of the Godhead.<sup>73</sup>

So, however you work things out in practice at home, in the Church and in the workplace (and the detail may well look different in each individual context), what you can and should say is that if Jesus could submit, then it is not too big a thing for me to submit. Submission is not degrading: it is something done voluntarily. In fact, submission in Biblical terms is the willing act of one equal to another for the purpose of a shared goal.

### **Trinitarian Apologetics**

All these wonderful things we've seen about the Trinity, how it is vital to our understanding of God as our sovereign, loving creator, how it provides the basis for our ability to live in his creation, a creation that is ordered and beautiful and how it provides the foundation for our understanding of relationships and how to live together, should lead us to a conclusion we would not have thought possible at the start.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is not something we need to defend; rather it is one of the most vital tools in our apologetics kit, particularly as we share our faith with those of other faiths. Imagine the scene; you are having a friendly conversation over coffee with your Muslim neighbour. He starts to ask you about the God you believe in. You tell him that you believe in the God who is Love and who is Sovereign. Then he says to you, "I don't get this Trinity business. Don't you believe in three gods? How terrible is that?" Normally, you would want to duck the question, say something along the lines of "but that's not the most important thing: the important thing is Jesus died for you because he loves you." This time you take a nervous gulp of your drink and then you decide to go for it.

"On the contrary, without knowing that God is Trinity, it is impossible for us to truly know him at all. I've just said that God is love and that God is sovereign. I'm sure that you would want to agree with me that God is sovereign, unchanging and all powerful. But can you really say that? Wouldn't you also want to discover that God is love? Can he be both of those things at the same time? Well, I believe that He can but only because he is the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If he wasn't, then we have a problem. You see, we would have to ask what happened when God created the Universe.

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<sup>71</sup> New Living Translation

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix B: "The 1999 Sydney Anglican Diocese Doctrine Commission Report: 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women' " in Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-varsity Press, 2002).

<sup>73</sup> Giles, *Trinity and Subordinationism*, 1. For a detailed response to Giles, see the Appendix in Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 486-489.



Without the Trinity, then when God made the Universe, He changed. You see, before then, God existed in splendid isolation. He had no-one and nothing to relate to. It is impossible to describe that God as loving because he only had himself to love, and we call that narcissism. Then one day he makes the world and begins relating to his creatures. In effect, creation fulfils a need in God. It gives him something to relate to. Whether he just relates to it as an overlord demanding submission or as a Father who loves doesn't matter. He has now changed. What is more, He is dependent on His creation to make up for what he lacks. He is not unchanging. He is not sovereign.

As Christians we believe that God is sovereign and unchanging. We also believe that He is Love. It's not just that God loves; it's not simply a case of him one day deciding to be merciful. Rather, God is love, it is essential to His character. He must eternally be love. How do we know this? We know it because the Father has eternally loved the Son, giving everything to Him. The Son has eternally loved the Father, choosing to obey him and so on. Therefore, in God, we see perfect love. God lacked nothing. He did not need to create. Creation is a outflowing of his perfection and his love. Creation itself is an act of grace. God did not need us but he chose to make us, to love us and to redeem us. Only with the doctrine of the Trinity can we really make sense of who God is and who we are."

## **9. Applying the Trinity – let's meet some people**

We've kept saying that what we believe affects how we live. So what does it mean to live out our belief in God the Trinity in daily life? It's time to meet some people.

### **Albert**

First of all, meet Albert. Albert is 45 years old, married with two children and he works as a manager in a large engineering company. Albert is proud of his work. The company manufactures a range of equipment and a number of their products are supplied to the National Health Service. As a child, Albert dreamt of being a doctor, but things didn't quite work out that way. However, at least in his current role, he feels that he does some good. Indirectly, he plays his part in saving lives. Albert (or Mr Hall to his team members) is well thought of in the workplace. He is known to be diligent in his work; he is kind and considerate: a good people person. He takes pride in the quality of his work and that of his team.

Now, here's the problem. Albert works incredibly long hours. If you try to call him in the evening, you won't be able to get through to him. He's still at work. He has even taken to going into work at the weekends. He usually has holiday left over at the end of the year. He very rarely makes it to Home Group and when he does, he looks washed out. Two weeks ago, he fell asleep during your impassioned conclusion.

### **Juliet**

Juliet moved into the area following University and quickly got involved in the life of the church. She has volunteered to help with youth work and is well loved by the young people; she plays piano and was quickly co-opted onto the music rota. In fact, she is a gifted musician and is being asked to play most weeks now.

Last week, you bumped into Juliet in town. She didn't notice you at first because she was sitting in Costa Coffee gazing intently into the eyes of the young man opposite her. When she did catch your eye, she suddenly seemed embarrassed. She introduced her companion, Romeo, a work colleague.

### **Tom & Gladys**

Tom and Gladys are a married couple in your home group. Ethel is also part of the group. Over the past month, Gladys has not been coming to Home Group. Tom has been coming on his own. Well, actually, he has been coming with Ethel, who he has been giving a lift to. That's fair enough, but you also notice that Tom and Ethel seem to be increasingly familiar – intimate even – with each other. There seems to be chemistry there. How do you respond?

### **Methuselah**

Methuselah joined the church 3 years ago. He came to an event and gave his life to Jesus. When he was baptised, he told his story of how he struggled with alcohol. The church helped him join a group for people with addictions and eventually he seemed to be clean of alcohol. However, you've spotted some clues and think that he is back drinking again.

### **Precosia**

Precosia was extremely off hand with you after the church service two weeks ago. You've tried to phone her since, but she refuses to answer your calls and this Sunday she visibly turned her back on you.

### **Getting to know them**

Hopefully at this stage, you'll have realised three things.

- a. These are all made up people!
- b. The situations they represent are very real!
- c. You are working with incomplete information. Before you can start to advise, there's a lot more that you want to know about them.

So why not try a little exercise? Jot down your initial observations. What else would you like to know? How accurate a picture are you likely to be able to form? What do you think is going on? What lies about The Trinity might be being believed?

## **10. The Trinity, work and family**

In our last post, we met Albert Hall. Albert is good at his job, but also working incredibly long hours. How does what he believes affect how he lives?

Our aim here is not to go through every aspect of the pastoral situation. We may well come back and do that later in order to join up all the dots, but here we're specifically looking at how the Doctrine of the Trinity might have an impact on a life situation.

Of course there are going to be questions you will want to ask and think through before you seek to counsel and advise him. There will be things that you would observe if you knew the person and other things that you might draw out from them in conversation. Here, we're going back to some of the things we learnt in our first series of articles, "How do you know?" You may remember from them that a person's beliefs, feelings, behaviours and health are all interrelated and affected by the environment around them. This means that, in Albert's case, we will want to talk about how his health is being affected by his work and the impact it has on relationships and emotions. We will also be aware of environmental pressures such as the economic climate, peer pressure, company culture etc.

We've also seen that in terms of what we believe, we are influenced by what we hear from others and whether or not we choose to listen to God's revelation or give priority to what others tell us. So from that perspective, I'm curious about what Albert has seen and heard from others: what models of work and family life has he been given by his own parents and by other Christians in the past? What does he hear from the media and from literature? For example, in Albert's case as a manager, does he read books, attend conferences or visit websites promoting particular approaches to management success? Do those messages conflict with Scripture?

Our aim here is not to psychoanalyse or to offer some form of self-help programme. There are, of course, lots of practical resources that he can access both from secular and Christian authors. Instead, our aim is to help him to hear what God's Word says. This will lead to life transformation as the truth of God's Word counters the lies or false beliefs that lead to wrong habits and choices.

### **The Trinity and the positives of work**

Now it may surprise you, but I'm not necessarily going to start by either criticising or feeling sorry for Albert because his work involves long hours. I'm not going to just label him as a workaholic and tell him to work fewer hours and spend more time with his family.

We will want to talk more about our view of work and rest – this will come later when we look at the lies we believe about Creation and New Creation. But our Doctrine of the Trinity has some important things to say about work and family life and one of the things it says is that work matters. When Jesus wanted to teach about his relationship to the Father, he talked about their work (John 5:19-23 & John 10:36-37)

I wonder whether sometimes we are so concerned to say that our identity is in Christ and not in work, sex, hobbies etc. - that in seeking to stop people from overplaying these as idols that we underestimate them. Whilst none of these things are the sum total of our identity and whilst we should not idolise them, actually each of them does play a part in shaping who we are.

For the Father and the Son, a key aspect to their relationship is that they share in the same work. Together, they are in the business of raising the dead and giving life. This is what we have referred to as “inseparable operation” before. Furthermore, it is exactly because the Father loves the Son that he allows Him to share in his work.

So let’s now apply that to Albert. Because of what John tells us about the Father-Son relationship, I don’t think that simply stepping in and assuming that someone is working “too much” is automatically right (though of course there are a few clues that in our specific scenario that this may be so).

We also need to bear in mind that our concept of “too much work” is relative. People in other cultures and historical contexts will have worked longer hours and some jobs necessitate long periods of time away from home.

Therefore the answer is not necessarily “work shorter hours” to spend more time with the family. What about fathers seeking to involve their children in what they are doing? Contemporary culture creates distance between work and family but traditionally there was less of a separation between family life and working life. For example, in the past, this might have meant that the son was the apprentice in the family business. In a slightly more contemporary, context, for me it meant that my dad used to talk to me about what he did. He also arranged for us to come and visit him at his workplace. He shared his pride, his joy in his work, with us. Dad was a confectioner and as it happens I didn’t follow him in his line of work, but he has passed something on to me: a deep love for the particular product!

### **The negative side of work**

In our scenario, though, there is clearly a problem. This is seen in the exhaustion that Albert experiences and also in some of his attitudes. Now, sometimes people seem to have little choice about the hours they work. The pressure people are put under can feel at times like a form of forced labour or slavery. The Bible does have things to say about working for harsh masters and I believe there are Trinitarian foundations for living in these circumstances as well. The foundations are simple, because we know God through Jesus the Son, we can know God as Father because we are adopted into the family as Jesus’s brothers (Hebrews 2:10-11). This means that when Paul tells us to work as though we are working for God even when our human bosses fail to treat us justly, then it is not simply that we are serving God as our higher employer; rather, like Jesus, we are working in the family business.

When Peter wants to show us how to live a good life even when treated harshly by cruel masters, he turns to the example of Jesus’ willing sacrifice on our behalf. The context of that sacrifice was Jesus’ submission to His Father’s will. We can face all circumstances including tyrannical bosses when we submit ourselves into the safe hands of the Father.

However, whilst sometimes that submission is right, it may not always be necessary. The context of 1 Peter was that the believers were living under Roman rule where slavery was legal. Those slaves had few rights and no recourse to a justice system to protect them. However, where rights existed such as those afforded to Roman citizens for a fair trial, Paul took time to remind the authorities that those rights existed and that they had breached them. We do have legal rights (I’m writing

specifically about the UK labour market) there are minimum wage and maximum working hour arrangements, legally guaranteed holidays, entitlement to notice, redundancy payments, consultation and due process etc. Where coercion and manipulation exist, then it isn't a legal phenomenon, but may well be a cultural one.

Given that this is so, then what if Albert was to insist on working his contractual hours and going home when he had completed them? I'm not suggesting that he is awkward or inflexible about this. A good employer-employee relationship and a concern for others means that he may well need to go over and beyond what he is contractually required to do. However, what if he worked as though that were the exception rather than the norm? He would continue to be diligent, to do his best to maintain his reputation both for hard work and concern for others. There should be no suggestion that he is difficult or lazy.

Why might he not feel able to do this? One answer is fear. There are probably three specific things that he fears

- i. I will lose pay
- ii. I might be overlooked for promotion
- iii. It may put me at risk when redundancy comes

Here's the problem. He is starting to believe lies about God because he is saying that these things are to be feared and John when he tells us that God is love tells us that perfect love casts out fear. The danger for Albert and for us is that we seek proof of God's love in our circumstances now rather than in the objective truth of the Trinitarian God who is love and the Father who sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for us.

Let's take this a stage further. Suppose that you bump into one of Albert's team one day. He recognises you: "Don't you go to the same church as Albert? I remember chatting with you over mince pies and coffee after the Carol Service he invited me to two years ago." You reply that in fact you do go to the same church. "He's a top bloke," says his colleague. "Yes, he's a good friend," you reply. Then the colleague frowns a little. "But there's one thing some of us are a little worried about. He's very driven at work. You couldn't encourage him to relax a little could you? He doesn't seem to be able to let go of control or delegate to us. He really cares but we're afraid he's heading for some kind of breakdown if he doesn't watch out."

Notice here a General Revelation observation. Driven, hard-working people tend to pick up more work. It can be a vicious cycle. Others let them get on with it. Sometimes that's because they take advantage, sometimes it's because they never get a look in because they're not trusted. Sometimes it's because they don't think they can meet the other person's high standards.

The other thing to say is this. It may not just be a case of Albert being afraid of the consequences of not slowing down that drives him on. Sometimes it is because he is looking for praise, recognition, a sense of being in control from his work. One of the things we've said about God as Trinity is that the oneness of God means that God can tolerate no rivals. Idols are things that we fear and idols are things, people and priorities that rival God, that take our attention away from him (in part or in whole). So one of the things I might want to talk to Albert about is the danger of his work becoming a rival to God.

Now this isn't the full picture. If we were talking pastorally with Albert, then there's still more to find out about him and a lot more to say about what we believe about God practically affects his circumstances. For example, we might want to consider the temptation to keep tight control to believe that only we can do things, to need to be needed and to depend on praise. These are things that we will no doubt want to follow up on as well. However, looking at a few things about the Trinity already starts to provide direct and practical application to Albert's situation.

## 11. The Trinity and Relationships

Remember Juliet? We left her sitting in a coffee shop gazing into the eyes of Romeo. So, a few days later, you meet up with Juliet for coffee and you broach the subject: "So who's the guy?" She tells you that they met at work, they really like each other and have been on one or two dates. No, he isn't a Christian yet, but she's hopeful. He did go on an Alpha course a few years back. He didn't complete it because it didn't really click with him at the time. He found the leader a bit dull and no-one really talked to him. Juliet thinks it would have been a different story if he had come and done Christianity Explored with us. Anyway, he's going to come and see her play in the worship group sometime soon. Maybe something in the sermon will speak to him, providing the pastor doesn't get too moralistic!

So you begin to talk to her. "Is this wise?" you ask. And you go through the usual stuff. You warn her that they will find that you don't share the essential things in common. He may tolerate her Christian faith now, but what about when other pressures come up? Which priorities will win out? If they do get married and have kids, then by what principles will they bring them up?

She says that she hopes by then that by then he will be a believer. She's heard of people that came to faith that way. You tell her that sadly this is so rare. You use the illustration "If I stand on a table and grab your hand and I try to pull you up and you try to pull me down, who will win?" and she says "I will of course!" "It's the same with relationships," you explain. "He's more likely to lead you away from Christ than you are to lead him to Christ."

Then something strikes you. You remember something you've read recently about the Trinity. So you begin to talk about the oneness of God and how this means that He has no rivals. This isn't simply about good advice and what is best for a Christian; she has a stark choice in front of her.

As a Christian she has made a commitment to worship the one true and living God; this is a covenant relationship. You use the imagery of marriage and baptism here. When you get married, you make a public commitment in front of witnesses to love and honour your spouse. This is an exclusive relationship. The Bible talks about wives submitting to husbands and husbands sacrificially loving their wives. In other words, they are meant to put each other's needs first. We sometimes say that we would do anything for them: even die for them.

When she got baptised, Juliet made a similar public and exclusive commitment to Christ, to worship and honour him as Lord and Saviour – without rivals. She submitted to him because he had sacrificially loved her, laying down his life for her. Now she is about to make similar vows to someone who does not share this all-encompassing, exclusive commitment. In other words, she is setting up her boyfriend as a person and her relationship as an ideal as rivals to God for her loyalty and affection.

This means that we are dealing with serious sin and rebellion. She is choosing to unite with someone who is dead in their sins, an enemy of Christ, a stranger to grace. Does that sound extreme? Well, this is really what the Bible says isn't it? Sin is serious, sex matters, our relationship to Christ is total and exclusive. We should not water these things down.

This makes her sit up and not in a good way. How dare you say these things? She has had different advice from others. Christians take different views on such things, so who are you to tell her what to



do? Then come the two killer responses. First of all, she tells you, "I've prayed so much about this" (we'll need to come back to that one later) and then the follow up punch: "If God is a loving God, then he wouldn't want me to be unhappy and alone. I love Romeo and that's what matters."

Do you see what she has done here? She's created her own definition of love and tried to apply it to God. You might say that she's reversed the phrase "God is love" in order to say "Love is God." Yet as we have seen, that's now how it works. Our understanding of love is incomplete and often faulty. We don't work out what love is and from there work out what God is like. Rather, God reveals what he is like and who he is and because he is love what he is like shows us what love is. Love is defined not in terms of sentiment not in us having our emotional needs met, but in terms of the sacrificial love which saw the Father send his only son into the world as an atoning sacrifice.

What is more, if this is God's love, then this must dictate how she loves Romeo. Is she happy to put her needs first, her need for Romeo's affection before Romeo's need to hear the Gospel clearly proclaimed without distraction?

Well, as with Albert, we will have to leave Juliet there for the time being. We've got much more to talk about with her if she's willing to come back again, but that will mean thinking more about who God is first.

## 12 “Don’t get drunk on wine ...” What happens when an alcoholic meets the Trinity?

Methuselah was one of the people we met a few weeks back. He had a drink problem. Now we know what The Bible has to say about alcohol. Whilst wine gladdens the heart (Psalm 104:15; Ecclesiastes 10:19) and is useful for sickness (1 Timothy 5:23), drunkenness damages and is associated with folly (Proverbs 20:1; 21:17). Paul contrasts being drunk with being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

This is the contrast. Alcohol has an impact on the whole person. It influences thoughts, words, perceptions and behaviours. Alcohol is associated with loss of control and regret. Being filled with the Spirit contrasts that. The Spirit also influences the whole person, what they think, say and do but with the result being joy, not regret and with the fruit being self-control not lost control.

So our first call to Methuselah is that he needs to be filled with the Spirit. In other words, he needs to follow a different master and let him take control shaping perceptions, words, behaviours etc.

But remember the twin errors we noticed when looking at what the bible says about The Holy Spirit. We can slip into either superstition or secularism .

Secularism sends Methuselah off to a counsellor. He learns to take control and takes steps to battle his addiction. Today he may regard it as an illness that needs treatment and even medication. Essentially he is on his own in the fight. When the programme or treatment fails, Methuselah is on his own again, he has failed.

Superstition –sees becoming a Christian in a magical way. I become a Christian and the desire to drink goes away. Now don’t completely or immediately discount that. We’ve met people whose desire to smoke, drink, take drugs etc has gone away overnight. However, we also know that they and we battle with other temptations and habits. We also know for every story of instant sanctification, there are thousands of stories about ongoing struggle.

As we saw earlier, belief in the Trinity offers there’s a third way. How does being filled with the HS provide that? Here are some ways.

- a. Adoption into a family. This means Methuselah receives accountability, support and help from others in the family. This also reminds us that he is adopted by a Father . This is important because His relationship to God is about love not fear. This is a place where he can be honest and where things can come out into the light (Romans 8:15-16).
- b. There is no fear because God The Son took his place on the Cross. There is no punishment to fear. He has been justified and received God’s righteousness (Romans 8:3-4).
- c. The Spirit brings God’s Word to Methuselah’s heart to convict him of the ugliness of sin. There’s a waking up to the reality of the mess but not in a hopeless way. Repentance so different to regret (Romans 8:12-14).
- d. His mind is also waking up to the beauty of
  - a. God’s Word
  - b. God’s people
  - c. God’s World

He will want to spend time in God's Word, spend time with others and spend time enjoying God's creation. These all provide rich and fulfilling alternatives take him away from the loneliness, emptiness and despair that feed his temptation to drink.

Our understanding of these things also shapes how we approach Methuselah when he slips up and falls back into old habits.

We will forgive him. This means not keeping a record of wrongs. We are not to try and be the policeman that the Father won't be. Isn't this one of the things that the older brother does in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:30)?

We still must challenge him. We will bring him back to God's Word . This is where he will experience the Father's discipline which is best for him.

We will encourage him. There is real hope. Encountering the Trinitarian God means that he can change.

### **13 The Trinity and broken friendships**

We now come to Precosia, the last of the group of people we met a little while back. With each of the scenarios, we have seen that what we believe about God and specifically about the Trinity is relevant to how we handle pastoral situations in the life of the church. The Doctrine of the Trinity is not dry theory but something deeply relevant and practical.

Precosia had been rude and off-hand, attempts at finding out what was wrong had been rebuffed. This isn't promising. Sadly, we can spot the obvious problems of sexual sin, addictive behaviour etc. However, in church life we can so easily tolerate situations that are equally unacceptable. There should be no place for gossip and slander in the church and no place for grudge bearing. The Bible is very clear that where there is a falling out, where someone has caused another offence that we should aim for reconciliation (Matthew 18:15-21). It is unacceptable when disputes are allowed to simmer for years on end with people turning up to church meetings without acknowledging the presence of others and keeping an unhealthy distance.

Why is this so important? Well remember what we have seen about the Trinity. Here are three of those lessons that apply directly to Precosia's situation

#### **God is Love and we are to love as he loved us**

Has this become repetitive? Well maybe it needs to be. We are good at talking about God's love, we apply to evangelism and to acts of mercy but this truth is meant to infiltrate every aspect of our lives as believers.

God's faithful love calls Precosia to stop putting up the barriers. If offence has been caused, whether intention or not then it needs to be resolved. She cannot treat church as a social event which she comes to and then chooses who she will relate to. She is part of a family. Equally, faithful love calls on you to keep persevering to seek resolution here.

#### **The Father and Son are one and we should be too**

Jesus prayed for his followers that they would be united. The model for this unity was His relationship with his Father. In other words, our unity is not just institutional, it is relational based on the love mentioned above and there is something here about unity of nature. Of course this isn't the same unity of nature as shared between the Father, Son and Spirit but there is a unity that says we are all justified together, we are all part of the same family and bear the family characteristics.

This unity is meant to provide a witness to the World of what our God is like. When Christians bear grudges and stop talking, then what witness does that give?

#### **There is no denial of distinction and so there will be diversity within the Church**

We do not become clones. There will always be different characters, styles, personal passions and priorities within a church. This diversity should not contradict or undermine the unity we have, rather it should complement it.

However, what this means is that we don't come together based on affinity. This is not a social group united because we are the same gender, ethnic group, age etc or because we like the same

music, humour, hobbies etc. Our unity is through the Father and the Son. Our unity and equality is in the Gospel. This means that within a church there are people that we would not naturally get along with, we wouldn't of ourselves choose to mix with them. That's the point about families. You don't choose your earthly family, and you don't choose your heavenly family either. You are born (again) in to it. This does mean that some relationships will need more work than others.

### **Conclusion**

The Doctrine of the Trinity provides incentive to you and Precosia. There is both the command to love one another and to be one and the promise/hope that this is possible.

## Part 3 What is God Like? His Attributes

## 14 What is God like?

Many pages back, we opened up the question about “Who is God?” We saw that people can either believe the truth about God or lies about God. It is when we believe lies about God that we end up in a mess. Believing lies leads to sin and idolatry; believing lies about God means that we cannot make sense of the World that we live in or of our own lives. Lies lead to meaningless.

The lies we believe about God can be summed up under two errors. The first is to believe that God is weak; that he lacks strength, that he lacks the power to act. The second is to believe that God is not good; he permits evil because he lacks love, kindness and mercy. These two errors often come up when we try to explain evil and suffering.

Some people believe that suffering exists because God is not good. Now, it is unusual for someone to explicitly believe in a personal, almighty, creator God who is evil as a consistent intellectual position. However, this belief can express itself in the following ways:

1. Ancient religious myths described gods who were constantly at war with each other. Creation and humanity were simply accidental by-products of these wars. Humans were made as slaves to serve the gods. The gods therefore had to be appeased in order to keep them on side. Sacrificial systems and religious ceremonies were designed for this very purpose of keeping the gods at bay.
2. Some religious and philosophical systems do not have a personal creator God but there is the sense that there is some form of ultimate power behind the universe. This ultimate power may be described as “fate” or “chance.” Now, fate may on the one hand be described as ethically neutral – it is neither bad nor good – but I would suggest that the very absence of love, kindness and goodness from such a power means that if it is not good, then it is bad: it is evil. Some people may describe themselves as atheists, but eventually they must acknowledge that there is something fundamental and foundational that is greater than the Universe or the Universe itself is ultimate. If the Universe itself is ultimate, then it is God: this is usually described as Pantheism. However, if the Universe is not ultimate and eternal, then it too had a beginning, which means that there must have been something before time began, before the big bang: something to explode into life. So many people are in fact materialists: they believe that matter is eternal. Impersonal matter operates a little like fate and a little like those warring gods of ancient folklore. Richard Dawkins describes evolution in terms of the gene which keeps on seeking to preserve itself through replication and mutation. Just as the ancients saw themselves as the accidental by-products of selfish gods, so modern people see themselves as accidental by-products of selfish genes.<sup>74</sup>
3. Some people in practice believe in a bad god. This is an emotional response to life’s circumstances. It’s not necessarily a thought out position, but it is how they live and how they feel. They see God as capricious and vindictive against them. They believe that God is just waiting to punish them and harm them. They may even talk in terms of the need to forgive God. Their God is not good.

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<sup>74</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, OUP, 1976, revised 1989), 12-20.

Some people want to believe that God is good, that he is loving and kind, that he wants the best for them, and that he does not want them to suffer. So they reason that if suffering exists and if God does not want it, then God is powerless to stop it. After all, if God wanted to end all the evil, suffering and heartache, then he would. So they reason that God must in some way be limited. Usually, it is assumed that, in some way, human free will must trump God's sovereignty.

One particularly extreme version of this view is called Open Theism. Open Theism is associated with a group of professing evangelical theologians including Clark Pinnock, Gregory Boyd and John Sanders. Their basic argument was that God's most essential characteristic is Love. God is in his very essence love. From there, they reasoned that true love's greatest gift is freedom: it never imposes itself. God gives us freedom and so forfeits control. How can we have real freedom to act if God knows what is going to happen in advance? So, the end logic is not only that God does not predestine the future, but he also does not foreknow it. The Open Theist God is limited by time: he can only operate in the present. He has finite knowledge; He can make mistakes and He even changes His mind.<sup>75</sup>

Now when we come to the God of the Bible, we find both these lies refuted. God is not weak and God is not bad: God is Love, He is Good, He is kind and gracious, but God is also all powerful, eternal, all knowing and infinite. Over the next few chapters, we are going to be finding out more about His character and what He is like. We will find that the truth about God's character is good news; it will help us to make sense of our lives and of the world we will live in. It will also help us to answer those big questions that we struggle with including "Why is there suffering and evil?"

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<sup>75</sup> See e.g. Clark H Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids MI.: Baker Academic, 2001), 4-5).



## 15 Simple

God is simple. That might be a surprising thing to say – shocking even. We tend to use the word pejoratively. In our world, simple is associated with inferiority and stupidity. In our world, things move from simple to complex. So we had better sort out quickly what we mean by simple and complex in this context.

Machines are complex. They have lots of different interconnecting parts. You are complex. You have limbs and organs, innate characteristics, acquired skills etc. Now, because you are complex, you can lose any one or number of those things at any one time and still be you. If you have a leg amputated, you are still you, just minus a limb and possibly a bit slower at getting around; your personality may well have changed over time, but you are still the same person; you will have acquired skills over time and maybe even lost them. There was a time when I couldn't speak French, then I studied up to GCSE, I could just about hold a simple conversation (there's that word again) and ask for basic directions, but I never used the language and so I lost the skill, but I am still the same person, just a little less useful on holiday!

Now, if something is simple, then that means it is the opposite of complex. It is not made up of different components; it is one entity. This means that you cannot add or subtract parts from it. That's what we mean when we say that God is simple. We are saying that every aspect of God's character is essential to who he is. You cannot chop a bit off of God and say that he is still God.

We know this first of all because God is Spirit. The Bible may sometimes talk about God's arm or God's sight metaphorically, but God does not have a body, limbs, eyes, organs etc. That is why God is invisible<sup>76</sup> and it is why God can be everywhere (omnipresent). We sometimes say that God is "incorporeal." As Bavinck says,

"The simplicity of God... leads very naturally (since all that is corporeal is composite) to the treatment of God's spiritual nature. Scripture to be sure, always speaks of God in human fashion, and ascribes to him an array of physical organs and activity, but even in this connection it observes a certain limit. Of the human body's internal organs only the heart and the 'intestine' are attributed to him, never organs of food intake, digestion and reproduction. Sight hearing and smell are attributed to him, not taste and touch. Nowhere is a body assigned to him. Although the Old Testament also at no point explicitly states that God is Spirit, yet this view is basic to its entire description of God."<sup>77</sup>

Secondly, we know this because throughout the Bible, God's characteristics are described in absolute terms to describe his essential essence. God is Love: in other words, he doesn't just have the quality of love/ it is not just that He is loving: He IS Love – love is essential to who he is. God cannot stop being loving. But the Bible also says that "God is light"<sup>78</sup> "God is Spirit"<sup>79</sup> "God is a consuming fire."<sup>80</sup> God is also Holy and Just. He is Sovereign, He is Eternal. Each of these statements

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<sup>76</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 187-191.

<sup>77</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 182.

<sup>78</sup> 1 John 1:5

<sup>79</sup> John 4:24

<sup>80</sup> Hebrews 12:29

describes something that is essential to God's nature. All of these characteristics are essential to him; all of them describe the whole of his being.

John Frame puts it this way:

"So God's attributes are not parts or divisions within the Godhead... but each attribute is necessary to God's being. Each is essential to him and therefore his essence includes all of them. God cannot be God without his goodness, wisdom and eternity. In other words, he is necessarily good, wise, and eternal. None of his attributes can be removed from him, and no new attributes exist without the others. So each attribute has divine attributes; each is qualified by the others."<sup>81</sup>

This doesn't mean that we just muddle all of the attributes up together as though each characteristic says exactly the same thing about God. Each attribute describes "everything he is."<sup>82</sup> However,

"This is not to say that God's attributes are synonymous. They all refer to his essence, but they describe aspects of it. God really is good and just and omniscient. The multiple attributes refer to genuine complexities in his essence."<sup>83</sup>

Frame also insists that simplicity does not mean:

"All attributes are equal and important. We may recall from chapter 18 the comment by one writer that God is a 'knitter' in Psalm 139. Well, I suppose that on that basis we should recognize (sic) 'knitting capacity' as a divine attribute. But of course that would not be as important as love or omnipotence. It would be a perspective on all of God's attributes, for all of God's work is the knitting of a tapestry to set forth his glory. But it is not the most important perspective in Scripture."<sup>84</sup>

Although I personally would argue that this is less about a different order of characteristics and more about the detailed description of what specific characteristics entail. In other words, "knitting" is not a characteristic in itself, it is an aspect of saying that God is Creator.

What it does mean is that each attribute which we use to describe God gives us a way in to describing his whole person from that perspective. For example, this means that when we say that God is love, then we are saying that love will characterise everything that God is and does. When we say that he is just, his justice is a loving justice, his might and power is exercised out of love, his holiness – i.e. that which distinguishes and separates him out from everything else is a loving holiness. It is his perfect and infinite love that distinguishes him from our imperfect, finite love. Similarly, his love, power and holiness are characterised by justice and so on.

### **Why is this important?**

God's simplicity is important because it protects us from the two main errors that we've described. In answer to the question, "Is God good or is God all-powerful?" we must answer "Both." God is

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<sup>81</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 226.

<sup>82</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 229.

<sup>83</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 229.

<sup>84</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 393-394.

good and loving and merciful and he is strong, all-powerful, invincible. More than that, the properties of goodness and love describe the very nature of his power; it is a good and loving power. It is love and kindness that motivates him to act to defeat his enemies and to rescue his people. When we say that God is love, this does not imply weakness; love is not soppy and sentimental in God, but it is strong.

So we simply cannot talk about God without saying that he is good and loving. A God who does not love is not just a lesser or weaker God. He is not God at all. This is important for anyone who is sliding into despair and can only see God as capricious and angry or who believes that God hates them. It is of course right to talk about God's anger or wrath, but we must never confuse this with a lack of love.

On the other hand, as we have seen, some people want to emphasise God's love at the expense of his sovereignty and power. Here are three examples:

First of all, in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Steve Chalke describes the discovery that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8) as something that comes late in the Bible. He says that

"This truth more than anything else informs Jesus' message. That God is love is the entire foundation upon which the kingdom and the shalom of God are built."<sup>85</sup>

Now, we've already seen as we've looked at The Trinity that saying that "God is Love" is something wonderful, an important starting point in our knowledge of God, something unique to the Christian Gospel. However, to make it absolute and exclusive in this way goes further than Scripture. Chalke contrasts the statement that "God is Love" with "God is power."

"Most people if they believe in God at all, think that he is power and that power is all about the domination of others. However, this assumption that God is first and foremost power is not new—it runs throughout history. In fact, the thought of a loving god was total anathema to ancient peoples."<sup>86</sup>

Power is seen in negative terms about abuse, control and selfishness. Power from this point of view excludes love. This leads Chalke to reject the idea of God's anger and eventually to describe the idea that on the Cross, Jesus bore the penalty of sin, satisfying God's wrath as akin to "cosmic child abuse."

Secondly, Rob Bell in his book *"Love Wins"* claims that the story of Jesus and love has been hijacked by other stories that are in fact nothing to do with the Gospel.

"I believe that Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is stunning, beautiful, expansive love and it is for everybody everywhere. That's the story."<sup>87</sup>

For Bell, the idea of Hell and eternal judgement cause a problem: these things don't fit with his story of love. He has three basic solutions to this. So first of all, hell is essentially a metaphor for the pain

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<sup>85</sup> Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 46.

<sup>86</sup> Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 47-48.

<sup>87</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, vii.

caused when we turn our back on God. It's about what happens here on earth, now.<sup>88</sup> Secondly, he argues that:

"Love demands freedom. It always has and it always will. We are free to resist, reject and rebel against God's ways for us, we can have all the hell we want."<sup>89</sup>

Thirdly, he intimates that in some way God must eventually save everyone. Whilst he sees the Gospels as exclusively through Jesus, it is inclusive in giving eternal life to all, regardless of whether or not they've believed in Him because God must either be "a loving heavenly father who goes to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them"<sup>90</sup> or "a cruel mean, vicious tormentor who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony."<sup>91</sup>

The third example of an exclusive emphasis on "God is Love" comes from Open Theism which we have already met. Richard Rice says that:

"From a Christian perspective, love is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God...The statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes giving us a definition of the divine reality."<sup>92</sup>

He goes on to add that "love, therefore, is the very essence of the divine nature. Love is what it means to be God."<sup>93</sup>

So, when we emphasise "God is love" as God's one essential characteristic, then the result is that we cannot cope with much of what the Bible has to say. We struggle with the idea of God's wrath with judgement with punishment. We end up struggling even to make sense of the purpose of Jesus's violent death on the Cross. "God is love" ends up becoming "Love is God." We not only decide that this is God's chief attribute, but we end up deciding what that attribute entails. We define love and from there we define God. So for these three errors, love is defined in terms of freedom and so God must give us freedom to do as we please.

If God is Simple, then we will not allow our own human definition of love to dictate our definition of God. Rather, we will allow all of God's other essential attributes to inform our understanding of what true love is. It is only by doing this that we can really come to make sense of this world with all its mess, evil and suffering, our place in it and exactly what Jesus has achieved for us on the Cross.

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<sup>88</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 93.

<sup>89</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 113.

<sup>90</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, 173.

<sup>91</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, 173-174.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Rice "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 18.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Rice, "Biblical support for a new perspective," 19.

## 16 God is Sovereign

As we think about who God is and what He is like, we keep coming back to those two big lies we can end up believing: that either God is not good or God is not sovereign (and sometimes both). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were presented with this twin temptation and they fell for it. When they chose to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge, they were falling into line with the two lies.

The Serpent told them that God did not really care about them; that when He forbade them from eating the fruit, He did so because He wanted to keep them in their place. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve declared that they did not believe in God's goodness. They believed the lie that God had made a rule for selfish, cruel reasons. Despite the fact that God had provided them with everything they could ask for, despite God's obvious love for them, they chose to believe that He was not loving and not good.

They also believed the lie that God was not sovereign. We see this in the way that they accepted the serpent's version of events. Was God really so weak that he was vulnerable to the challenge of his creation? Could they really rival Him? We see it in their decision to make their own rules. They did not want to submit to God as though His law was not wise. They wanted to be in charge. Finally, we see it in the way that they hid and the excuses they made as though they could escape from God's presence: as though He would not find them and see through their excuses.

And so in place of those lies, it is vital that we discover the truth about God's goodness and His sovereignty.

### The Independent God

If God is sovereign and without rivals, then nothing can influence, control, overrule or overpower Him. God is invincible and without rival. There is nothing and no-one greater than Him. That is why we are not to worship other gods. It is not that they are real rivals to his power and could usurp Him: it is that they are not Gods at all.

This is sometimes described as God's "aseity." It comes from a Latin term "A-Se" "meaning from or by himself."<sup>94</sup> In other words, God is unique; there is no other being comparable to Him. He is in a class of His own. Specifically, only God is self-existent. This is the point Jesus makes in John 5. He says that both the Father and the Son have "life in themselves." All other creatures live and breathe because God breathed life into them.

No-one made God. There wasn't a time when he began and there won't be a time when he ceases to exist. This is important because once again it reminds us that in no way does God depend on us. The God who is eternal is also eternally "love" because He is the eternal Trinity.

"Scripture defines God's love, therefore by the relationships among the Father, the Son and the Spirit, not by his relationships with the world. Trinitarianism, therefore guards God's aseity, his independence from the world. ..God does not need the world in order to love. He is not relative to the world. Thus his love is fully sovereign. He loves as the Lord."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 600.

<sup>95</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417.

God is independent in every sense of the word.

“God is not only self-existent, but self-attesting and self-justifying. He not only exists without receiving existence from something else, but also gains his knowledge only from himself (his nature and his plan) and serves as his own criterion of truth. And his righteousness is self-justifying, based on the righteousness of his own nature and on his status as the ultimate criterion of righteousness.”<sup>96</sup>

In other words, it is not just that He is uncreated but because He is the Creator, because He is the source of goodness, then he is the one who defines what righteousness and goodness is. This is important because sometimes we can view worship as something that God needs as though he needs our affirmation. God is not dependent on us for anything. He does not need our love or approval. Rather, we are completely dependent on God. As Bavinck puts it:

“Thus being all sufficient in himself and not receiving anything from outside of himself he is by contrast, the only source of all existence and life, of all light and love, the overflowing fountain of all good.”<sup>97</sup>

This takes us to the heart of the Gospel. Our entire relationship with God is dependent on grace. It was out of grace, not need, that God made us. This contrasts with ancient (and some modern) religions that see humans as servants of the gods, there to provide for them. It contrasts with atheistic evolution where humans are merely vehicles for genetic replication.<sup>98</sup>

Not only are we dependent on Him, but we can completely depend on Him. If He is without beginning, then he is also without end. He isn't going away anywhere any time soon. God is eternal.

### Lord of Time

Our understanding of what it means to say that God is "Lord of time" has probably been severely damaged by a Saturday evening TV show, Dr Who. The Doctor is a Time Lord, an alien with two special traits. He is able to time travel in his special space ship, The Tardis and he is able to regenerate meaning that when he is near death, he can renew his life and live for many hundreds of years. These are incredible powers but in the end, The Doctor is still limited and constrained. He grows old, eventually he will use up his last regeneration and die. There are fixed point events that he cannot change. In the end, The Doctor is not the Lord of Time and Space, he is just an ordinary alien.

When we say that God is eternal, we are not just saying that he has been around for ever and ever. Some people do describe God as everlasting, but temporal. This would mean that he had existed for an infinite period of time, but that he also experiences progression of minutes, hours, days, weeks, years and so on.<sup>[1]</sup>

Now whilst they would also insist that God is not subject to the ravages of time and does not age, I would suggest that when we think in those terms, then we do end up imaging a God who ages, the old man in the sky with the long white beard. In a day and age where the aging process is feared,

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<sup>96</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 602.

<sup>97</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 150.

<sup>98</sup> Remember Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, OUP, 1976, revised 1989), 12-20.

eternal youth is an idol and novelty trumps experience every time, then The Ancient of Days is seen as dated, frail and weary. This is not how we are meant to think of the eternal God.

Back to Dr Who. In the episode, "The Woman Who Lived" a vivid picture is painted of how this type of longevity becomes seen as a curse. The Doctor saves a young girl's life but in the process turns her into a hybrid human-alien who will live for ever. Hundreds of years later, he meets her again. She is not grateful at all. Life has dragged on. She has seen loved ones die. Her finite mind means that she forgets her past. She is bored, always looking for a new adventure. Life has grown stale.

We need to get a different grasp on what it means to say that God is eternal or we will end up with a similar stale view of time and eternity. If we have the wrong idea of what it means to say that God is eternal, it may even corrupt our understanding of what it means to have eternal life.

When we say that God is eternal, we are saying He is the one who created time. In Genesis 1, God separates darkness from light and calls one night and the other day. At this point, God creates time. We then see the progression of day followed by night through the first seven days. God creates the sun and the moon. The earth rotates around the sun and the moon around the earth so that we are able to measure months, seasons and years. It was only when God created that time started. This is why Jesus was able to declare Himself "Lord of the Sabbath." As the one who created all the days of the week, it was for him to decide what should be done on one of those days!

God is over and above time so that he is not subject to time. Peter puts it this way:

"But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day."<sup>99</sup>

Theologians sometimes say that he has all of his existence at once.<sup>100</sup> This means that he is not waiting for an experience to happen to discover something new. God is eternal and so he knows everything. He is omniscient. God's ability to know everything because he is outside of time has sometimes been compared to an observer sat up in the mountains with an elevated view of a long road. The observer can see the beginning and the end of the route. He can see the traffic jams, the road works and the accident blackspots.

Now, this can be useful in helping us to grasp how God's eternal existence results in his omniscience. He knows everything, past, present, future, because he sees everything. There is nothing hidden from Him. However, it could also leave us picturing God as distant and remote. What is the use of seeing all the traffic problems if you cannot do anything about it, if you are too far away to act, too far away even to shout out a warning before it's too late? Timelessness becomes lifelessness.

Again, we are not meant to see God like this. It is not that God is outside of time and unable to get involved. We do better to say that God transcends time. He is greater than time, but he is also present in every part of time. Think of how God relates to space.

## **The Lord of Space**

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<sup>99</sup> 2 Peter 3:8

<sup>100</sup> John M Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 552.

God created space and time. He is the one who made the Universe. He formed the planets; he put the stars into space. This massive Universe with its many galaxies that stretch far beyond the reach of the most powerful telescopes was made by Him.

This means that God is greater than the Universe. He is infinite. Now, when we say that He is infinite, we are not just saying that He is a bit bigger than the Universe. There's not a way of getting to God's outer limits. That's mind blowing. God is over and above space.

But is God outside of space, distant, not present? No. He is omnipresent. He fills space with his presence. The Psalmist says that there isn't a place in the Universe where we could run to and God would not be there.

God transcends space and time. The Lord of Time is not a double hearted alien flying backwards and forwards to different planets at different points of history. If The Doctor existed in real life instead of fiction, wherever and whenever his Tardis landed, he would discover that God was already there before him. And that means that when we think about prayer, we should not see that urgent desperate plea as an attempt to summon God from a distance space, persuading him to come and act. God is already present with us.

What we are seeing here is that God is both Transcendent and imminent. He is great and infinite beyond our understanding, beyond defining beyond analysing but he is near, close. We can know Him and we can have a relationship with Him.

### **The God who knows all things**

If God made and rules over everything in Time and Space, then it flows from this that He knows everything, past, present and future. This is sometimes referred to as omniscience.

Theologians distinguish between God's knowledge of Himself and His knowledge of creation. Bavinck says:

"To be distinguished from God's self-consciousness is his world consciousness. An earlier theology, accordingly divided 'the knowledge of God' into a natural or necessary knowledge (the knowledge of simple intelligence) and free or contingent knowledge (the knowledge of vision). The two are not identical as pantheism would have it, for the Absolute is only to be conceived as being logically and potentially prior to the world. It is totally insufficient to explain the existence of the world. God does not need the world to become personal and self-conscious."<sup>101</sup>

You will see here that, once again, Bavinck emphasises God's independence from his creation. He contrasts Christian theology with Pantheism which confuses God with His creation. Sometimes we use art and creativity to learn. Art therapy can be a helpful way of working through an issue or an emotion. The result is that as the person works on a painting, sculpture, dance, poem or song, they realise something about themselves, maybe something hidden deep in their subconscious which unlocks the solution to their problem. We are not meant to think about God like that. God does not need His creation in order to learn about himself. God was not unfulfilled before he spoke Light and

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<sup>101</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 195.



Darkness into existence. This is why God's knowledge of his creation is described as "free" or "contingent."

"Natural" or "necessary knowledge" is what God knows about Himself. It also describes the way in which the Father knows the Son and vice versa. It is necessary because God is a personal Being, not an impersonal force. God cannot stop knowing; otherwise, He would not be God. In other words, God is simple!

Turretin talks about how God knows things. He says:

"Concerning the intellect of God and the disquisition of his knowledge, two things above all others must be attended to: the mode and objective. The mode consists in his knowing all things perfectly, undividedly, distinctly and immutably. It is thus distinguished from human and angelic knowledge."<sup>102</sup>

What does he mean by this? Well, helpfully, he goes on to break down and expand upon what he means into these categories – "perfectly, undividedly, distinctly and immutably":

"perfectly because he knows all things by himself or by his essence (not by forms abstracted from things – as is the case with creatures – both because these are only in time with the things themselves, but the knowledge of God is eternal, and because he can have no cause outside of himself)."

This means that what God knows is complete and exhaustive. There isn't a gap in his knowledge. He will not find out something new about the subject later on. He knows every detail that there is to know. His knowledge reflects his character. He is infinite and so his knowledge is infinite too.

"Undividedly because he knows all things intuitively and noetically, not discursively and dianoetically." – i.e. he does not have to deduce one thing from another."<sup>103</sup>

We probably need to look up a couple of words in the dictionary here! "Intuition" is to do with the ability to know things "immediately without conscious reasoning."<sup>104</sup> "Noetically" simply means that something is known intellectually with the mind."<sup>105</sup> "Discursive" is all to do with discourse or discussion and if something is known "dianoetically" then this is the opposite of intuition and relies on logical deduction. In other words, God does not need to acquire knowledge through learning, experience and reasoning. All of his knowledge is available to him, perfectly and at once.

"Distinctly, not that by a diverse conception he collects diverse predicates of things, but because he most distinctively sees through all things at one glance so that nothing g, even the most minute, can escape him."<sup>106</sup>

We humans have a problem. Because we are finite, we have to choose how we are going to know about something. We can either gain broad knowledge or get the big picture or we can get stuck

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<sup>102</sup>Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XII.ii. (Giger, 1:207).

<sup>103</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XII.ii. (Giger, 1:207).

<sup>104</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 587.

<sup>105</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 763.

<sup>106</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XII.ii. (Giger, 1:207).

into the detail. The problem with the first is that a big picture view tells us the scope of the subject, but missing detail can lead to mistakes in decision making. “The Devil is in the detail.” The problem with the second is that we are so obsessed with the detail that we lose perspective on what it is telling us. We “cannot see the wood for the trees.”

God does not have the problem that we have. His vastness and greatness does not put him at a distance. He knows the detail; “the very hairs on your head are all numbered”<sup>107</sup> and he knows the big picture.

“Immutably because with him there is no shadow of change, and as he himself remaining immovable gives motion to all, so he sees the various turns and changes of things by an immutable cognition.”<sup>108</sup>

God is the constant reference point. His knowledge does not change. Things change around Him, but He knows about all of the changes. He knows when you will fall in and out of love, He knows you both as the young person now with a full head of dark brown hair and he knows the older you with balder, greying hair. And when you are old and grey, He will not know you or love you any less.

### **The God who does not change**

If you want to impress people with your learning than you can always tell them that “A natural implication of God’s aseity is his immutability.”<sup>109</sup> That sounds impressive doesn’t it? If, however, you want to come across as a normal member of the human race and you want others to understand you then you can say that because God is sovereign, independent, without rivals and self-existent (aseity), this means that he will not change (immutability).

Here’s Bavinck using slightly more everyday language.

“Unchangeable in his existence and being, he is also, in his thought and will, in all his plans and decisions. He is not a human that he should lie or repent. What he says he will do (Num. 15:28; 1 Sam 15:29). His gifts (charismata) and calling are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). He does not reject His people (Rom 11:1). He completes what he has begun (Ps. 138:8; Phil 1:6). In a word, he YHWH, does not change (Mal 3:6). In him there is ‘no variation or shadow due to change.’ (James 1:17).”<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, the fact that God does not change is something that Bavinck says distinguishes the Creator God from the creature. “The difference between the Creator and the creature hinges on the contrast between being and becoming.”<sup>111</sup> And so he says:

“If God were not immutable he would not be God. His name is ‘being’ and this name is an ‘unalterable name.’ All that changes ceases to be what it was. But true being belongs to him who does not change.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Matthew 10:30.

<sup>108</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XII.ii. (Giger, 1:207).

<sup>109</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 153.

<sup>110</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 153.

<sup>111</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 156.

<sup>112</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 154.

In other words, God is trustworthy. It is not in his nature to change his mind. He is not fickle and because he is sovereign and independent, because there is no power in the Universe greater than Him, nothing to manipulate Him, nothing to force him to change course, we know that he won't change His mind against His Will.

This means that we can trust God to keep His promises. He will not go back on His word. So the writer to the Hebrews says:

<sup>18</sup>So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. <sup>19</sup>This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary. <sup>20</sup>Jesus has already gone in there for us. He has become our eternal High Priest in the order of Melchizedek."<sup>113</sup>

At this point, hopefully you will have picked up on something wonderful and vital. We have talked about the truths that God is sovereign/powerful and that God is good/loving, but we may still end up treating these things as polar opposites in tension. Again, the temptation in our day and age is to see all power and authority as bad, controlling, tyrannical and abusive. This is not so with God. It is not just that He is strong and that He is good. He is good because He is strong. His power and sovereignty is good. He exercises a loving rule. I guess this is another way of saying that God is Simple. These characteristics are inseparable. Sovereignty and goodness are different perspectives on the same God.

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<sup>113</sup> Hebrews 6:18-20.

## 17 God is Good

So God is sovereign, he is infinite, all powerful, knows everything and is in control. But that still doesn't answer the question 'what is God like?' This all-powerful God could be a sort of gentle giant or a mean ogre. In fact, for many people, the description of an all-powerful God is likely to suggest the latter. A God who is in control becomes a controlling deity. A God who knows everything is complicit in evil, manipulating or interfering. Either that or God is big, powerful and infinite but distant, disengaged and impersonal. In summary, God may be great, but we still haven't answered the question, "Is God good?"

And so we come to some more attributes that describe God and tell us something about His goodness. In this section, we will return to the wonderful truth that God is love. Then we will go on to see that God is good because He is wise, holy, righteous and just. These things all reflect his goodness. But first of all, a little conundrum.

### How do we know what goodness is?

Or in other words, is God good because he matches up to some given criteria of goodness? If so, is God really good? Surely this would mean that there is a standard which God has to conform to, but who or what sets that standard?

Or if God is sovereign, doesn't that mean that He gets to decide what goodness is? But if God sets the standard for goodness, then doesn't that make the concept as a moral ideal meaningless? It becomes an arbitrary quality. This is sometimes referred to as the Euthyphro problem, as John Frame explains:

"So Plato, In Euthyphro, poses the question of whether piety is what the gods say it is, or whether the gods command piety because of its intrinsic nature, apart from their own wishes. In Plato's mind, the former makes the nature of piety arbitrary, one that could be changed on the whim of a god. But the second alternative, which Plato certainly prefers, means that piety is independent of the will of the gods, something to which the gods' opinions are subject. So either piety is arbitrary or the gods are subject to something higher than themselves."<sup>114</sup>

As Frame argues, the problem comes from failing to see the attributes of God as personal. They become abstract and separate from him as a person. In Greek thinking, and in the end in much of polytheism, personal gods were limited and finite. They were not the true divine power. True divinity, true otherness was impersonal and distant. In the end, even the gods were subject to abstract concepts such as fate.

Frame puts it this way:

"In my view, the problem arises from the inability of Plato and other philosophers to see goodness as something personal. Many of them never seem to question the view that

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<sup>114</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 405.

goodness, truth, etc., are impersonal. They reason that since goodness is an abstract entity, it cannot be identical with a person.”<sup>115</sup>

He acknowledges that “A form of circularity here is unavoidable”<sup>116</sup> because:

“There is always a kind of circularity when we are dealing with an ultimate standard. If one’s standard of truth is human reasons, one can argue for that standard only by a rational argument, an argument that presupposes the truth of its conclusion.”<sup>117</sup>

This is something that our contemporary world struggles with. We don’t like the idea of an ultimate standard or authority. So many times I am told when I make a statement “but that is just your opinion.” But if I treat everything subjectively, then what I say is that I and I only will provide the standard of truth. I will choose to believe what I choose to believe. So in other words, as we discovered when we looked at how we can know truth, there is always an ultimate authority. There is always a final standard, whether external (I believe an expert, tradition or peer) or internal (I follow my own heart). So, to some extent, there will always be some circularity at some point.

Now as Frame explains, we can either have a narrow circularity (“it is so because it is so”) or a wide circularity which takes into account the reality of our experience and shows that the truth claim is proved in the heat of life. So with regards to goodness,

“The biblical writers never say that God is good because he is good. That would be narrow circularity. Rather they describe and praise God’s might acts of deliverance, his kindness in providence, and his grace in salvation. These are big, bold obvious evidences of goodness.”<sup>118</sup>

In other words, the objective statement and the subjective experience will normally match up. Remember, this was how we responded to Scripture. We trust God’s Word to be true because it is God’s true and reliable word and it claims to be true. It is the final authority and so it is not subject to another authority testing its truthfulness. However, that truth has been proven time and time again as we have been able to rely on it.

It’s the same with goodness. I know what goodness looks like because the good God defines it both by what he says and what he is like. I live the reality of that goodness and prove it in my experience of life. I see the way that God provides for my needs, I see beauty, I find joy, peace and comfort in his world and specifically in my relationship to Him. So the subjective and the objective tally up. I guess I could try to say that joy, laughter, love, food etc. are really bad things and that bullying, the mindless infliction of pain, lying, manipulation, theft etc. are really good, but that just sounds and is ridiculous and I don’t really need to argue that one out!

So let’s go on to see some of those characteristics which shout out God’s infinite goodness.

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<sup>115</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 406.

<sup>116</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 407.

<sup>117</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 407.

<sup>118</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 408.

## God is Love

This is that wonderful statement from 1 John 4:8 which we started our thoughts on “Who is God?” with. We saw that we can say that God is Love not just that He loves. The love is an eternal and essential attribute of God. There wasn’t a time when he started to love and there will never be a moment when He will stop loving. We know this because God is Trinity. As we saw earlier, the Father has eternally loved the Son and the Son has eternally loved the Father and so on with reference to the Holy Spirit. This is God’s self-love (John 3:36; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31).

“This love between the persons of the Trinity is eternal. And since God does not exist without his three persons, the love among those persons is necessary to his nature.”<sup>119</sup>

We then go on to see God’s love towards his creation. This can be defined as

“his self-giving affection for his image bearing creatures and his unselfish concern for their well-being that leads him to act on their behalf and for their happiness and welfare.”<sup>120</sup>

And whilst His self-love must be described as necessary or an essential and natural aspect of who he is, his love for others is described as “free.”<sup>121</sup> It is something that he chooses to do; it is an act of the will.

How does God love? Turretin distinguishes love for creatures, for humans generally and for the elect.<sup>122</sup> In fact, Bavinck prefers to limit the use of the word love specifically to those who are saved, stating that:

“Now it is indeed possible to speak of God’s love to creatures or people in general (the love of benevolence), but for this the Scripture mostly uses the word ‘goodness’ and speaks of God’s love, like his grace only in relation to his chosen people or church (the love of friendship).”<sup>123</sup>

We may not be comfortable with that type of restrictive language. After all, John seems to talk quite broadly in terms of God’s love for the World. However, Turretin and Bavinck are right to make distinctions in terms of the way in which God loves. We should not be surprised by this. After all, if I were to say that I love ice cream, Bradford City, my friends and my wife and mean the same in each context, your reaction would be somewhere between concerned and disturbed.

So, we can talk about God’s love for all people because:

“If God is good to all, as we have seen, then surely he loves all. For both goodness and love in these contexts refer to God’s benevolence, his seeking the welfare of others. If God is

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<sup>119</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 416.

<sup>120</sup> Jack Cottrell, *What the bible says about God the Redeemer* (Jopin, MO.: College Press, 1987), 336. Cited in Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 414.

<sup>121</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417.

<sup>122</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XX.iv. (Giger: 1:241).

<sup>123</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 215.

good to all, then surely that benevolence is no accident. It is motivated by a self-giving affection and concern for his creatures' well-being, that is by love."<sup>124</sup>

In other words, love involves a conscious, willed decision to seek the welfare and good of others. Frame is saying that when your unbelieving neighbour gets up in the morning and opens his fridge and it is stocked with good food because God has caused the sunshine and the rain to guarantee a harvest, this is no accident. His benefit is not the unintended by-product of God's plan for others. God really intends him to benefit.

So God shows his love to all by sustaining creation. He shows his love to all by restraining evil, for example by providing governments to uphold law, order and justice. God shows his love to all by enabling people to flourish, gain knowledge, acquire wisdom and develop skills. God shows his love for all in giving us joy and delight in art and recreation. Food, government, learning, relationships, marriage, sex, families and children are all examples of God's benevolence. We sometimes refer to these things as "common grace." Just as we distinguish between special and general revelation, so we distinguish saving and common grace. By this, we mean that everything we enjoy is an example of God's good gifts to us. By the way, it is on this basis that I think even unbelievers can join in to some extent with our praise and worship at gatherings even though they don't yet fully understand the Gospel. This is particularly true when we invite them to join in a Harvest Celebration, thanksgiving for a new child or a wedding. It's also why I believe that we should uphold the institution of marriage and God's standards for marriage not just for believers but for the whole of society. It's one of the reasons why Christians should engage in public life.

Bavinck identifies a further aspect of God's care for all people. He says:

"The goodness of God which spares those who are deserving of punishment, is called forbearance or patience." (Numbers 14:18)<sup>125</sup>

However, God's love is specifically seen in salvation. Believers are the recipients of saving love. As Frame says, "So there are various ways in which God loves everyone, whether elect or non-elect. But the form of divine love most central to Scripture's message is the love of God in saving sinners."<sup>126</sup>

This means that "The New Testament typically defines love (both the love of God and the love required of believers) by reference to the Cross of Christ." (E.g. John 3:16, Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10).<sup>127</sup> In other words, if we want to properly understand God's Love, then we won't get it by simply looking at his benevolence to all creatures. We only truly see love at Calvary.

This is important because what people often do is make a big mistake. They take the phrase "God is love" and try to define and describe God on the basis of their understanding of what love is. There are two problems with this. First of all, our own definitions of love tend to be superficial and sentimental. Secondly, we are trying to do something we cannot with the grammar and syntax of 1

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<sup>124</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 417.

<sup>125</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 213.

<sup>126</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 420.

<sup>127</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 421.

John 4:8. Just because “God is love” does not mean that we can say “love is God.” Love is not equal to God.

We must allow the nature of love to be defined by God. Love is what God is. We know from previous discussions that we only truly know what God is like through revelation. God tells us what he is like in the Bible. So when John tells us that “God is love” he goes on to define and describe love in terms of God the Father sending the Son to die in the place of sinful man.

Now, there are two further implications to arise from this. First of all, we see exactly why Bavinck wishes to be so careful about how, where and when he uses the word “love.” Love is about relationships. Love does not happen at a distance and so “The goodness of God appears as love when it not only conveys certain benefits but God himself.”<sup>128</sup> Again, we understand that because we see it in a small way in human relations. There is a massive difference between the person who helps us out, who gives us what we need and the person who takes time to get to know us. The first person may show kindness, pity, compassion, but it is the second who shows love.

Secondly, Frame raises a striking and perhaps surprising question. “People sometimes ask whether God’s love is ‘unconditional.’”<sup>129</sup> This is surprising because actually we rarely see that set as a question. It is usually a statement that God loves unconditionally. This unconditionality often comes with the expectation that we should love in the same way and furthermore is defined by the expectation that unconditional love equals unconditional acceptance. It means we take people as they are without any demand or expectation on them to change. Now look at what Frame says next:

“In one sense, God’s love is conditional, for God declares conditions that must be met by those who are seeking his blessings. Some don’t meet those conditions and receive eternal punishment. But when God loves someone in Christ before the foundation of the world, God himself meets the conditions, so that that person will certainly be saved eternally. To those who belong to Christ, there are no further conditions. Nothing can separate us from his love. In that sense, God’s saving love is unconditional.”<sup>130</sup>

So, we do better to say that God’s love is conditional, but because all of the conditions have been met in Christ, there are no conditions left for us to meet. So in that sense love is unconditional. This then links to the question of change. Does God love and accept us without expectation on us to change? Actually, no! This is completely the wrong end of the stick. Earlier in 1 John 3:1-3, we are told

“See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don’t recognize that we are God’s children because they don’t know him. 2 Dear friends, we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. 3 And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as he is pure.”

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<sup>128</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 215.

<sup>129</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 423.

<sup>130</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 423.



In other words, it is not simply that God loves us whether or not we change. It is that God loves us by changing us. Change is necessary, possible and for the believer unavoidable and certain because God is love and because He loves us. Interestingly, Frame goes on to suggest that in a sense God's love is "controlling" and an aspect of his Lordship because "His love chooses us before the foundation of the World."<sup>131</sup> By "controlling", he doesn't mean manipulative or abusive, but Lordship includes authority and control so that God's love takes the initiative and acts to rescue us and bring us to life.<sup>132</sup>

So when we say that God is Love, we are saying two great and wonderful things. First of all, we are describing God's eternal and unchanging character expressed in the Trinity. Secondly, we are describing his relentless, sacrificial pursuit of lost, sinful humans, taking their place, bearing their sin and shame, forgiving them, restoring them to life.

"How marvellous, how boundless  
Is Your love, is Your love  
How wonderful, sacrificial  
Is Your love for me...

Yes Jesus loves me  
Yes Jesus loves me  
How wonderful  
Yes Jesus loves me  
This is love  
You gave Yourself"<sup>133</sup>

### **God is wise**

One of the ways in which we see God's goodness is his wisdom. We have already seen that God knows everything. He is omniscient. He knows the past present and future. But it is one thing to be knowledgeable and another to be wise. As Herman Bavinck says:

"Everyone knows that erudition, knowledge and wisdom are far from being synonymous and are certainly not always found together in the same person. A simple person often excels a learned one in wisdom."<sup>134</sup>

Bavinck treats the distinction between knowledge as wisdom as being that "Knowledge is theoretical; wisdom is practical and goal-orientated."<sup>135</sup> So, we all know of people who are very clever, who can remember lots of facts, pass exams and get advanced qualifications, but when it comes to making sensible decisions, they appear clueless. They don't know where to start. They don't know how to apply their learning. On the other hand, there are people we trust and naturally turn to when we want help, advice and direction who have never passed an exam or sat for a formal

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<sup>131</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 423.

<sup>132</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 424.

<sup>133</sup> Rend Collective © 2009 Thank you Music

<sup>134</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 203.

<sup>135</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 203.

qualification in their life. So when we talk about wisdom, we are right to connect it with common sense. Proverbs 8: 14 says:

“Common sense and success belong to me.  
Insight and strength are mine.”

However, I want to go a stage further and suggest that wisdom has a moral quality. Wisdom is not just about making sensible practical decisions; it’s about making good, loving decisions. In Proverbs 8, Solomon allows a personified wisdom to speak for herself. She describes herself as the first of God’s works, “The LORD formed me from the beginning, before he created anything else.” (Proverbs 8:22).” She was “appointed in ages past, at the very first, before the earth began.” (Proverbs 8:23). This is poetic language but if it talks about something existing from the beginning before anything was created then it pushes us back into eternity. As wisdom speaks, we are again and again confronted with the strong moral dimension to this attribute:

“I, Wisdom, live together with good judgment.” (8:12)

“Common sense and success belong to me. Insight and strength are mine. 15 Because of me, kings reign and rulers make just decrees.16 Rulers lead with my help and nobles make righteous judgments. (8:14-16)

“I walk in righteousness, in paths of justice.” (8:20).

God is uniquely wise. God is the one who knows everything. He knows our innermost secrets and He uses that knowledge for good. It is because God is infinitely wise that He and He alone can be trusted with infinite knowledge. He will not misuse, manipulate or misrepresent what He knows to cause harm. He does not need to abuse knowledge to gain an unfair advantage because He is already sovereign and without rival.

This is why when it comes to human wisdom that we are told:

“Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment.” (Proverbs 9:10)

True wisdom starts with God and belongs to Him and Him alone.

I was the architect at his side. I was his constant delight, rejoicing always in his presence.  
31 And how happy I was with the world he created; how I rejoiced with the human family!”  
(Proverbs 8:30b-31).

### **God is Righteous and Just**

Romans 1:16-18 tells us that the gospel is good news because it reveals God’s righteousness. Now “God’s Righteousness” in Romans 1 could either mean a quality that belongs to God, meaning that “God is righteous” (subjective righteousness), a quality that God gives to us meaning that Paul is talking about “righteousness from God.” Alternatively, it could mean that God acts in a righteous way: “God exercises justice.” Exegetes have argued long and hard over the exact intention of Paul’s words, but we don’t need to worry too much about that too much yet because if Paul is describing a quality that God gives to us or a manner in which he acts, then surely that righteousness or justice

must be rooted in a quality that God already has. So what does it mean to say that God is righteous and just?

Bavinck describes God's righteousness in this way:

"God's righteousness is first of all manifested in history, in his government of the World, and in his providential guidance of Israel, and is therefore especially developed by Psalmists and prophets. It is revealed everywhere and extends even to wild animals (Ps 36.7) God is the Judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25). It consists in that God repays everyone according to his or her works, treating the righteous one way and the wicked another (Gen 18:25)."<sup>136</sup>

This means that:

#### Righteousness is about fulfilling obligations

So, for example, in Deuteronomy 6:24-25, God's people are said to be righteous if they keep God's commandments. This is just after Moses has set out the Ten Commandments. These standards are clearly relational; they are all to do with how we love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love our neighbours as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). So when God looks at what His people are doing and finds bloodshed and cruelty, he describes this as the opposite of justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:7). Righteousness therefore has a legal or forensic dimension because if there are obligations that we are meant to keep, then when we fail to keep them, we will be held to account and those who are treated wrongly and are denied what they are owed can look to the courts to uphold their case (Exodus 23:7; Deuteronomy 25:1).

#### Righteousness is about meeting an objective standard

When we talk about righteousness, we are saying that there is something permanent by which we can judge everything. We can know what is right, true, good, lovely. What is that standard? How do we know what it is? Well, the clue is in what Paul said and what we learnt when we were looking at "How do we know?" Righteousness is revealed to us in the Gospel. Specifically, this means that we find out what righteousness is when we look at Jesus, but generally we see how the whole of God's revelation points to his righteousness.

#### Righteousness is revealed in Creation

When God made the World, he described it as good. We often talk in terms of creation order. For example, as Evangelical Christians, we often link our views on marriage and divorce, same-sex relationships etc. to our understanding of God's purposes for men and women in creation (c.f. Genesis 1:27-28, Genesis 2:4ff). In Isaiah 45:7-8, righteousness is closely aligned with the goodness of creation which reveals who God is:

I create the light and make the darkness. I send good times and bad times.  
I, the LORD, am the one who does these things.<sup>8</sup> "Open up, O heavens, and pour out your righteousness. Let the earth open wide so salvation and righteousness can sprout up together. I, the LORD, created them.

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<sup>136</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 222.

Righteousness is revealed in God's covenant faithfulness

This is NT Wright's preferred perspective. When talking about what Paul means by Justification by faith, he says:

Paul's doctrine of justification is therefore about what we may call the covenant –the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant whose purpose was from the beginning the saving call of a worldwide family through whom God's saving purposes for the world were to be realized."<sup>137</sup>

God is the one who makes a promise to give Abraham descendants. When those descendants rebel against Him, he keeps loving them. He sends prophets to warn them and Judges to rescue them. Eventually, he sends Jesus as their Messiah.<sup>138</sup>

The Covenant shows God's righteousness because it reveals his love and his mercy. God provides for His people and protects them. He rescues them from captivity; he gives them life, freedom and a land.

The Covenant shows God's righteousness because it comes with rules. The problem with just looking at creation is that we can confuse "is" with "ought." We look at the world around us and see things in nature, but were they originally meant to be like that? (e.g. why do bees, wasps, nettles and jellyfish sting?). God's Law (e.g. The Ten Commandments) tell us what it means to love God and our neighbour. They show us how to be righteous.

Righteousness is revealed in God's character

John Piper says that God's righteousness is all to do with his concern for his own glory.<sup>139</sup> In fact, it is that God judges and shows mercy for his own name's sake (Psalm 79:9, 98:9). In other words, God wants his own name to be honoured. His name, as we will see later, is a declaration of His character. Sin and injustice are about our attempt to deny God glory, to reject His rule and reign. So Romans 1:18 talks about humans exchanging God's glory for a lie and Romans 3:23 talks about us falling short of God's glory. The result is that Paul tells us no-one except God is righteous (Romans 3:10).

This is another way of reminding us that God is Simple. If you want to know what it means to say that God is righteous, then look at his love, goodness, wisdom etc.

And so Turretin says that when we talk about justice and righteousness

"The word 'justice' ...is generally used in two senses: either for the universal comprehension of all virtues (as injustice is taken for every kind of sin) and is called universal justice (*justitia universalis*) by which, as God is in himself perfectly holy and just, so in all his works he preserves an incorruptible rectitude and justice."<sup>140</sup>

God's righteousness flows from his goodness. He cannot do wrong. It is seen in his wisdom as he uses his knowledge to act impartially, to uphold and reward good. It is central to His love. So when

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<sup>137</sup> Wright, *Justification*, ix.

<sup>138</sup> Wright, *Justification*, 97.

<sup>139</sup> Piper, *The Future of Justification*, 64-65.

<sup>140</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III. XIX.ii. (Giger, 1:233).

we talk about what exactly it is that God loves, we can say that God loves justice and mercy. God loves those who are good and just.

This is important because God will act towards specific situations and people in light of his character. So Turretin defines particular justice as that "which gives to each his due, is occupied with the rewards or punishments and is called distributive."<sup>141</sup>

Now this means that God necessarily loves justice and hates sin so he must punish sin (vindictive justice).<sup>142</sup>

This is why we need the Gospel

#### God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel

It is revealed in the Gospel because there we meet Jesus, the perfect obedient Son. He resisted temptation. He was good and kind. He kept the Law perfectly, loving His Father with all His heart and loving not just his friends and neighbours, but his enemies too. He was obedient in death.

It is revealed in the Gospel because righteousness and justice make Christ's atonement necessary. So when we look at the Cross, we see how far short we fall of God's glory. We are unable to save ourselves.

It is revealed in the Gospel because through Christ's work on the Cross, we too can be made righteous. (2 Corinthians 5:21).

"The righteousness of the Lord vis-à-vis his people consists finally in giving them his righteousness."<sup>143</sup>

#### **If God is good, then....**

We have seen something of God's moral characteristics. God is not just great, strong and powerful; he is good, loving and just. This is a God whom we can love and trust, not just fear and obey. God not only commands our worship. He is worthy of it too.

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Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III.XIX.

<sup>141</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III. XIX.ii. (Giger, 1:233).

<sup>142</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, III. XIX. xi. (Giger, 1:237).

<sup>143</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 225.

## 18 God is holy

What happens when you put God's goodness and sovereignty together? The answer is that you get a sense of God's glory and holiness.

What is holiness? Well, it is something to do with being distinct and different. When applied to people and objects, it means they are set apart as special, precious, God's personal possession. So for example, in the Old Testament, the Temple in general and the inner sanctuary in particular were regarded as holy places. Objects used in worship were set apart and consecrated as holy as were the people (priests) who officiated. In fact, the whole of God's people Israel and the Church are described as a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

What does it mean to say that God is holy? Bavinck tells us that, "at present everyone acknowledges that the concept of holiness in the Old and New Testament express a relation of God to the World."<sup>144</sup> This means that God is completely distinct from his creation. His "otherness" is sometimes referred to as His "utter transcendence and power over all creatures"<sup>145</sup> (c.f. Numbers 20:13; Isaiah 5:16; Ezekiel 20:41.) This means that although on the one hand, we bear God's image, on the other hand, God is not like us. This means first of all that when we talk about God's supremacy, power, eternity, omniscience, etc. these refer to a different quality of existence. It is not merely that God is bigger, lives longer or knows more than us. It reminds us again that time, knowledge, space etc. are created by God and for God.

Sometimes, when expressing God's transcendence, theologians like to talk about God's communicable and incommunicable attributes. Communicable attributes are those which he gives to us. This will include things like, our ability to love, know things etc. Incommunicable attributes are those which God does not pass on. We will never be eternal or infinite, for example. However, to some extent, the distinction is a little bit too neat. Even our ability to love is different to God's love because it is finite.

Talking about God's holiness in this context also leads us to think about his glory. The original word for glory had the idea of weight or value. Glory reminds us about God's sheer overwhelming beauty and majesty. So in Isaiah 6, the prophet goes into the temple to serve by offering incense. There in the temple, he is overwhelmed by an amazing vision of God's manifest presence. In the vision, Seraphim sing:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies!  
The whole earth is filled with his glory!"<sup>146</sup>

When relating God's holiness to his goodness, the characteristic takes on a moral dimension. This might be thought of as the absence of or "freedom from all defilement...a purity that is total and utterly untainted."<sup>147</sup> There is no evil in God. He cannot sin. God is not even tempted to do wrong (James 1:13).

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<sup>144</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 216.

<sup>145</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 216.

<sup>146</sup> Isaiah 6:3.

<sup>147</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 216.

The risk is that this sounds a little severe, dull even. When we think about holiness in those terms, we associate it with dull religious meetings, monks, cold church buildings and stained glass windows. But remember that holiness is about God's relationship to his world. In positive terms, the moral dimension describes "God's condescending goodness and grace"<sup>148</sup> (Hosea 11:9; Isaiah 57:15; Ezekiel 20:9). Holiness is seen not merely in God's freedom from evil, but in his delight to do good.

This means that, with God, transcendence does not contradict immanence. The God who is distinct and exalted is the same God who draws near to us. This is the God who, in the person of Jesus, was born in Bethlehem, lived among us and without fear of contamination by the unclean and the sinner drew near, dining with outcasts and touching lepers. This is the God who chooses still to be with us through the Holy Spirit.

So, holiness is anything but severe, dull or restrictive. In Romans 6:22, it is described as a fruit or outcome to do with salvation and eternal life. In others, holiness for us is a good thing: a benefit of salvation that leads on to other benefits. We will also of course immediately connect the idea of fruit and fruitfulness with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Holiness is to do with joy. It is a happy thing. And this is important because we are to be holy as he is holy. Even when we talk about God's holiness pointing to his distinctiveness and otherness, we discover that holiness is itself in a sense a communicable attribute.

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<sup>148</sup> H Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God and Creation*, 216.

## **19 God in the Dock – challenges to His greatness and goodness (Part 1)**

We can choose to believe either truth or lies about God. Earlier, we named the lies: that God is not good and/or God is not great/ sovereign. That if there is a God, then he must be either infinite and all powerful, but therefore distant, impersonal, disinterested or even cruel, but certainly not loving, good and kind; or good, loving and personal, but small, ineffective, unable to help.

In fact, some people choose to refuse both options. This is in effect the atheist's choice. God is neither good nor great, loving nor sovereign. In fact, there is no being in the Universe that meets that job description for "almighty God."

Now, we have identified these beliefs as false. We've insisted that there is a God who is both good and great. However, you could argue that all we have done is insist and state. We've not argued, refuted, proved our position. We've not taken on the arguments against us. We've not done the apologetics.

So this is where we do that!

We are going to look at both challenges. First of all, we're going to deal with the sovereignty question. We're going to examine, challenge and respond to Open Theism. Then we'll go on to look at the argument that God is not good. We'll particularly be responding to the arguments of modern day atheism – most notably Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

You'll realise at this point that apologetics is not just about responding to objections coming from completely outside of Christianity. Yes, it will involve conversations with atheists and people of other faiths, but it does also include defending a right understanding of who God is within the Christian community. Why is this? Well, error becomes riskier the more subtle it is; the more it looks like truth, the closer to home it gets. Billy Graham once talked about having just enough religion to inoculate you against the real thing. A misrepresentation of Christian belief can be just as deadly as an all-out attack on it.

So when we come to Open Theism, that is the problem. It comes from within the Christian community. In fact, it comes from within evangelicalism. Its proponents come across as kind, generous of spirit, humble, well intentioned. I personally had the opportunity to correspond with Clark Pinnock via email. He seemed to me to be a very gracious man. There was I, a young Christian emailing a professor of theology, and he took the time to read my emails carefully, think about what I said, answer my questions, consider my objections, concede where he thought I had a point. I respected him for that. Reading the proponents of Open Theism, you can see that their motives are genuine. They want to defend God against the charge of cruelty. They have a pastoral care for those whose real experience of suffering puts up a barrier to belief.

So as I examine and respond to Open Theism, my aim is to return the courtesy that Clark Pinnock showed me. However, we cannot run away from the problem. Good people with good motives can still go badly astray and that does not make the error any less toxic.

### **The Challenge of Open Theism**



Let's remind ourselves of what Open Theism is all about. Clark Pinnock explains the origins of the theory as follows:

"In order to bring out the truth of God's rule over the world, the dynamic character of his nature and the openness of his loving relationships more effectively, myself and some colleagues offered the 'openness of God' model, so called because it was an appealing and unused term. In it we portrayed God as a triune communion who seeks relationships of love with human beings, having bestowed upon them genuine freedom for this purpose. Love and freedom was our central concern because it was God's desire for loving relationships which required freedom. In a controversial move, we also envisaged God making a world, the future of which was not yet completely settled, again to make room for the input of significant creatures."<sup>149</sup>

So, as we have seen before, Open Theism starts with the premise that God's essential characteristic trait is Love. Furthermore, it goes on to offer us a description of what love entails. Love is about the ability to enter freely into a relationship. Therefore, love requires freedom. If God is to genuinely be love, then he must allow us to be free. If I am not able to make choices and decisions for myself, then I'm not really free. This causes two problems. First of all, it suggests that God coerces and controls me, which does not fit with Pinnock's understanding of love. Secondly, it means that I am unable to exercise freedom and choose to love God back and yet this is what God wants. I cannot fulfil his creation purpose for me.

Pinnock goes on to outline four principle tenants of Open Theism:

"First God loves us and desires for us to enter into reciprocal relationships with him and with our fellow creatures. The divine intention in creating us was for us to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own. In this, we would freely come to collaborate with God toward the achievement of God's goals. Second, God has sovereignly decided to make some of his actions contingent on our requests and actions. God establishes the project and elicits our collaboration in it. Hence there is conditionality in God, in that he truly responds to what we do. Third, God chooses to exercise a general rather than a meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate and for God to be resourceful in working with it. Fourth, God granted us the libertarian freedom necessary for personal relationships of love to develop. God freely enters into give and take relations with us which are genuine and which entail risk-taking on his part, because we are capable of letting God down."<sup>150</sup>

So God has limited himself. He allows himself to be constrained by our actions and by an unknown future. God is now in some way dependent upon his creation.

Now, in engaging with Open Theism, there are four key questions that we need to respond to. The first one is "What does it mean to describe God as "love?" Secondly, does God change? Thirdly, to what extent does or doesn't God know the future? Fourthly, what type of freedom do human beings have?

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<sup>149</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Maker*, 3.

<sup>150</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Maker*, 5. He takes these from his colleague John Sanders.

Now, the third question “To what extent does God know about the future?” is something that arises out of our understanding of God as eternal and all knowing. If God is eternal and so transcends time and if he knows everything, then it follows from this that God will be able to see the future. We will return to this part of the question a bit later on because there’s a further piece of the jigsaw to add. We need to think a little bit about what God does as well as who He is and so we will be going into a bit more detail about things like foreknowledge alongside the big questions of election and predestination. Similarly, the type of freedom we have relates to those questions and so will be treated later.

So, at this stage, we want to focus on two aspects of the Open Theist challenge. First of all, we will revisit the question of God’s Love. Have Open Theists got the definition right? Secondly, we will return to the question “Does God change” and subject it to a little more scrutiny.

### **What kind of love is this?**

So what is the nature of God’s love? Remember four things at this stage. First of all, that Open Theists are not the only people to be emphasising love as God’s chief essential attribute. Rob Bell and Steve Chalke both make essentially the same move and in fact, as we saw earlier, Bell also equates love with freedom which is a key plank in his argument about hell.

Secondly, we have also argued that love is of great importance when talking about God. In fact, we have argued that this is the right starting point, not because it is God’s only or even dominant attribute, but because it is the best way in to understand God as personal and so to grasping what all the other attributes are about.

Thirdly, we have said that whilst love is important, it is not the only essential attribute. We have described God as simple which means that all of his attributes are essential. This also means that there is a strong connection, overlap even, between how we talk about the attributes.

Fourthly, we have insisted that we must allow God to define love and not the other way round. God is love, but love is not God. This love is defined and demonstrated in terms of the relationship between the members of the Trinity and specifically with regards to his love for us demonstrated by the Father giving his Son as an atoning sacrifice for us. This is important and helps us realise why the notion of God’s simplicity is so key. If God has one stand out characteristic, then that attribute becomes elevated so that, in a sense, God is subject to it. God must conform to a rule or principle outside of himself. As we saw when we looked at God’s goodness, this means that God is subservient to an abstract, impersonal principle. This is the very problem with Open Theism and its view of God’s love. Because Open Theism makes love God’s essential attribute and not only that, goes on to define love specifically in terms of God’s freedom, this means that God’s ability to speak, act, even ‘to be’ in terms of his other attributes is constrained by “freedom.”

Notice please that it isn’t even “love” that holds the highest position in our hierarchy. It is freedom that has control. Freedom is sovereign. Freedom wins. Is it any coincidence that “Freedom” is one of the principle values that modern and post-modern Western society upholds? I used to own a T-Shirt emblazoned with the motto “Live Free or die.” It was the motto of New Hampshire, but it’s really the motto of the Western world. In the film “Braveheart”, Mel Gibson’s William Wallace cries out “You may take away our lives, but you can never take away our freedom.”

Freedom has become a modern god. But in fact, it is a far older god than that isn't it? Our desire to be free goes back to the Garden of Eden. That's what the temptation was all about. If Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they would be autonomous. They would not only know right from wrong, but have the freedom to choose independently from God's Word.

But how important is freedom to love? Well, there are a couple of important things at stake here. First of all, when looking at human relationships, we want to emphasise that these should be free from coercion, manipulation and abuse. The principle of consent is an important safeguard against the sinful human tendency towards gaining things for selfish reasons by forceful means.

Secondly, freedom and consent are really to do with equality. It's about me having the right to say "yes" or "no" to you because you do not have absolute power over me. If I can choose how I respond to you, then I am, at least in some respects, on a level with you.

Thirdly, freedom and consent are actually really important if I'm to know what someone's will on a matter is. I cannot read minds and hearts. I can try to second guess, but a lot of the time, I'll get it wrong. I need you to tell me what is on your mind. I need you to make your will clear.

Now, immediately, we will realise that when talking about human-human relationships, the principle of free consent is pretty much vital. We don't want to lose it. But the reason why freedom is important is not that it is part of the definition of love, but because it is important to human interactions. It is a safeguard made necessary because of our finiteness and fallenness.

However, do these things necessarily apply to a Creator God who:

- a. Is by definition much greater than us
- b. Is completely good
- c. Knows all things, including our innermost thoughts so that he knows me better than I know myself?

But what really are the essential traits of love? Let's go back to what we've already learnt about love. First of all, if love is seen in the Trinity, then we can see that love is to do with faithful and exclusive intimacy. Why do I say that?

Well, first of all, there is an intimacy seen within the Godhead that enables John to tell us that "The Father and Son are one" and that "The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father." The members of the Trinity are of one will and they take pleasure and delight in each other.

Secondly, it is faithful. We see this in the way that the Son is obedient to the Father, even to death. We see it in the Father's commitment to the Son that whatever and whoever He gives to him will not be lost.

Thirdly, it is exclusive. Now, this may be a little bit more implicit, but it can be seen in the distinction between the nature of the relationships within the Trinity and between the Trinity and us. Their relationship is not just about a social union (indeed I wonder when I read Pinnock's quote again whether Open Theism gets this): rather it is a union based on the persons of the Trinity being of the same essence. This exclusiveness can also be seen in the jealousy that each person has for the others' honour and glory.

There's a little side point here which is that these are the character traits that we also see in a healthy marriage.

Then when we turn to that other demonstration of God's Love, the incarnation, we see what it means for God to love someone other than Himself. Here love can be defined in terms of a concern for the other's well-being resulting in willingness to give sacrificially of oneself for the benefit of another, regardless of whether or not they deserve it.

Now, at this point, I don't see reciprocal freedom as essential to those descriptions. And why should it be?

Many years ago, our family were on holiday in Wales and on an outing to a viewing point where you could see puffins, I got dangerously close to the cliff edge. Without hesitation, my dad instinctively ran, grabbed me and pulled me back. He may well have put himself at risk of losing his balance and going over the edge. He certainly did not stop to ask me if I wanted pulling back. In fact, as a youngster, I probably had little sense of the danger and my first reaction was resentment at the indignity of it all. But my dad's priority wasn't my free choice; it wasn't even whether or not I would like him in return. His concern was for my wellbeing. This concern overrode my need for independence. In the end, love trumped freedom.

And that's the beauty of the gospel. We crave freedom, we desire autonomy. But God's love trumps our freedom. The Gospel saves us from ourselves. To be sure, we are set free from sin, death, slavery and our own selfishness, but we are set free from these things in order to serve the true and living God. We are not left to run free. We are brought home.

#### **An unmoved mover: are we sure that God doesn't change?**

Earlier, we insisted that God does not and in fact cannot change. We said that this was an essential aspect of his sovereignty. We argued that it was because God did not change that we could trust him to be faithful and dependable.

Not so, respond the Open Theists. God's loving nature may not change and that's what we depend upon, but God can change his mind, repent of previous choices and set out on another course of action.

What is more, they argue that when we come to the Bible, we find that this is exactly how God is portrayed. God repents and regrets making humankind (Genesis 6). He listens and responds to Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18) and he listens to people of Nineveh when they cry out for mercy, reversing His decision proclaimed through Jonah that Nineveh would be destroyed. In Jeremiah 18, we find God portrayed as a potter making a pot and then changing his mind and remoulding it in a different way.

According to theologians such as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, the Bible presents God as someone who interacts with his creation, listens to their pleas, engages emotionally and so sometimes changes his mind. So if this is what the Bible says, how have we ended up with a different view of God? Well, Pinnock reckons that

“Traditional theology has been biased in the direction of transcendence as the result of undue philosophical influences. Greek thinking located the ultimate and perfect in the realm of the immutable and absolutely transcendent. This led early theologians (given that the Biblical God is also transcendent) to experiment with equating the God of revelation with the Greek ideal of deity.”<sup>151</sup>

In other words, we have seen something that is true about God (his transcendence) and thought that we have seen the same thing in ancient philosophy, when in fact it was something different. For the Greeks, the highest entity was impersonal, unknowable, without emotions. This first cause was “the unmoved mover” according to Aristotle. So, claims Pinnock, we end up with a false doctrine about God that he does not change because he is completely independent from his creation and devoid of emotions. This is sometimes referred to as the Doctrine of Impassibility. Pinnock comments:

“Impassibility is the most dubious of the divine attributes discussed in classical theism, because it suggests that God does not experience sorrow, sadness or pain. It appears to deny that God is touched by the feeling of our infirmities, despite what the bible eloquently says about his love and his sorrow. How can God be loving and not pained by evil? How can God be impassible when the incarnate Son experienced suffering and death?”<sup>152</sup>

Open Theists are adamant that this cannot be right. Surely, the whole point of the gospel is that God does suffer for us. That’s what the incarnation and atonement are all about.

“God does not just imagine what it would be like to suffer, he actually suffers because of his decision to love. God has chosen to be open to the world and to share in its suffering because of his love. God’s transcendence over the world does not prevent him from interacting with the world or from being affected by the world.”<sup>153</sup>

### So is God impassible?

It’s worth noting as we start our response that Pinnock and Open Theists are not alone in having a problem with impassibility. John Frame notes that “With regard to divine emotions, we have seen that Scripture ascribes many attributes to God that are generally regarded as emotions.”<sup>154</sup> He even goes so far as to allow that in a sense, on the Cross, God suffered.

“But is there a sense in which God suffers injury or loss? Certainly Jesus suffered injury and loss on the cross... Christ’s sufferings are the sufferings of God. The Council of Chalcedon (451), which defined orthodox Christology said that Jesus has two complete natures, divine and human, united in one person. We may say that Jesus suffered and died on the cross ‘according to his human nature,’ but what suffered was not a ‘nature,’ but the person of Jesus. And the person of Jesus is nothing less than the second person of the Trinity, who has taken to himself a human nature. His experiences as a man are truly his experiences, the experiences of God.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 106.

<sup>152</sup> Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 118.

<sup>153</sup> Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 119.

<sup>154</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 608.

<sup>155</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 613.

He goes on to suggest that this is a Trinitarian suffering

“Are these experiences only of the Son, and not of the Father? The persons of the Trinity are not divided; rather the Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son (John 10:38; 14:10-11,20; 17:21).”<sup>156</sup>

So the idea that God is completely devoid of emotion and feelings and unaffected by his creatures is not one that mainstream evangelicals hold to. Indeed, you might be forgiven for thinking that a paper tiger has been created here. It is true, of course, that some theologians have ended up pushing God to a distance and depersonalising him, but that’s not how most Christians (including academic ones) think of Him or speak of Him.

So what is it that theologians are trying to say when they talk about impassibility? Well, even Pinnock acknowledges that

“At the same time impassibility is a subtle idea with a grain of truth. We have to distinguish ways in which God can suffer from ways in which God cannot suffer. God is beyond certain modes of suffering, just as he is beyond certain modes of change. We could say that God is impassible in his nature but passible in his experience of the world. Change occurs in the world and affects God when he becomes aware of it. When that change involves innocent suffering (for example), God responds tenderly to it.”<sup>157</sup>

I would argue that it is not that there are ways in which God does suffer and ways in which he doesn’t. Rather, it’s that how we understand and experience emotions as finite human beings is different to how God experiences them.

Let me give you two examples. When Bradford City reached the Cup final a few years back, the fans were overcome with the joy and excitement. They had a positive emotional response that overwhelmed them. Many could be described as delirious, unable to focus on work or anything else. Notice there the idea of being overcome. Their emotions overpowered them even to the point of interfering with their capability to act and think rationally (supposing football fans ever act rationally!) At the other end of the spectrum, if you have seen someone overcome with grief, it is deeply distressing. They find that they cannot cope with life. They are overburdened. Their distress may even affect them physically so that they collapse and even fall ill.

That’s what we really mean by passibility: it is the possibility that someone can be overcome and overruled by emotional responses. Now, put in those terms, it may seem a bit more obvious why we do not want to describe God as passible.

We would agree that a definition of impassibility which leaves God remote, unfeeling etc. is wrong. This goes against the Biblical description of a God who is love and who is filled with joy and delight. However, the point of impassibility is more that God cannot be conquered by passions. This is vital. First of all, his joy and delight are never giddy, out of control drunkenness. Secondly, he cannot be overcome by grief to the point that it denies, diminishes or destroys his joy.

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<sup>156</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 613.

<sup>157</sup> Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 119.

The latter point is important. If we insist that God is passible and so suffers pain that diminishes his joy, what we are really demanding is that God be a victim with us. God needs not only to experience pain, but that pain should take away from his joy. Yet

- a. If we insist that God must be a victim with us, then it suggests a distorted understanding of our own condition. We are not the victims. We are the rebels. Our suffering is just.
- b. To actually want this for God is in fact part of sinful rebellion. I declare my desire to hurt Him.
- c. Those who want God to suffer with us will find that this is not the best solution to the problem of suffering. A God overwhelmed by grief is not best placed to help.
- d. It is selfish: it requires God to be miserable because I am, but ignores all the other wonderful causes of joy in the Universe.

Let me expand a little on that last point. Imagine two people having the following conversation (obviously it's not how an actual conversation would go, but it probably accurately reflects the subtext that can appear in conversations)

Imogen: "I am unhappy so you should not be happy."

Doris: "But although I am sad for you, I am also really happy at the moment and that is my dominant emotion."

Imogen: "But how could you be happy when I'm sad because my granddad died?"

Doris: "Well, after years of trying, we finally are expecting a baby."

Now, whilst we would have every sympathy with Imogen and understand both her sadness and even the awkwardness towards her friend, we would still say that it would be unhealthy for her to keep on insisting that Doris should not be happy for her to truly sympathise. Yet, this does in reality happen in human relations and it is in effect what we are asking of God if we completely reject the theology behind impassibility.

So, whilst I can see the problems with some of the ideas and concepts behind impassibility, I still think that, properly defined and distinguished as referring not to God's lack of emotions (passions), but as His immunity to being overcome by them, it is right to say that God is impassible.

Now, this relates directly to the question of change. Open Theists argue that God will change because:

- a. He responds to emotional stimulate (both His own feelings and ours).
- b. God experiences the future as an unknown and therefore has to respond to new knowledge.

At this point, the best thing to do is to go and look at the specific examples of alleged change cited and see what is going on.

### **The Bible says...**

Richard Rice, one of the other Open Theist theologians, says:

“The Old Testament description of divine intentions also contributes to a social and dynamic profile of God. Scripture tells us that God formulates plans and purposes and he occasionally changes his mind. To use a biblical expression, God repents.”<sup>158</sup>

He then gives us our first example, Genesis 6:6.

#### Genesis 6 – God’s repentance leads to the Flood

Rice comments:

“Sometimes God rejects something that he has already done. ‘The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart.’ (Gen 6:6 NRSV). ‘The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel’ (1 Sam 15:35 NRSV).<sup>159</sup>

What does it mean when we say that God repents? The Hebrew word used is *nacham* which can mean:

- a. “be sorry, console oneself.”<sup>160</sup>
- b. “be sorry, moved to pity, have compassion for others.”<sup>161</sup>
- c. “Be sorry, rue, suffer, grief, repent of one’s own doings.”<sup>162</sup>

Is this just an emotional response? Well, this is what respected Old Testament Scholar, Gordon Wenham, says:

“‘Regret’ or ‘repent may suggest a mere change of attitude, but when God ‘repents,’ he acts differently. Here and in 1 Sam 15:11 and Jer 18:10 he regrets some good thing he has done for his people, whereas in Exod 32:12,14; 2 Sam 24:16; Amos 7:3, 6 he repents of some evil he is carrying out. That God should change his mind might lead to him being accused of capriciousness which Scripture firmly denies: ‘God is not a son of man that he should repent’ (Nu 23:19; cf 1 Sam 15:29). Such remarks obviously raise various questions for the doctrine of divine sovereignty and its correlate human responsibility, but theological systematization is hardly the concern of the biblical narrators. For them divine repentance is a response to man’s changes of heart whether for better or worse.”<sup>163</sup>

In other words, this is not simply an emotional reaction or a moral appraisal of the situation.<sup>164</sup> How God acts relates directly to what has happened. If humans had not sinned, if their filling the earth had brought blessing and caused the earth to be filled with goodness, then God would have acted

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<sup>158</sup> Rice, “Biblical Support,” 26.

<sup>159</sup> Rice, “Biblical Support,” 27.

<sup>160</sup> E Brown, S Driver & C Briggs, Brown Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Reprinted Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson, 2004. Boston, MA.: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1906), 636.

<sup>161</sup> BDB, 637.

<sup>162</sup> BDB, 637.

<sup>163</sup> Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1. Word,1987), 144.

<sup>164</sup> Contra Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 92.



differently. But Wenham frustratingly refuses to engage with the systematics question “does this equate to a change of mind?”<sup>165</sup>

However, we can engage with the sovereignty issue because there are a number of things that stand out. First of all, even if you think that God’s omniscience does not include future events, we still would not want to go so far as to say that God started out completely ignorant of how things would or might turn out.

Well before Genesis 6, God will have seen that things were going wrong. Genesis 4 saw a family quarrel leading to Adam’s son murdering his brother. Then Cain’s descendent Lamech also kills.<sup>166</sup> It is not just Cain’s decedents who have inherited a sinful nature from Adam. In Genesis 5, we have Seth’s family tree. Seth was Adam’s third son. The chief refrain throughout is “and he died.” The penalty of death hangs over all humanity. Only Enoch is singled out as walking with God. So it was already clear, long before Noah, that things were not turning out well.

Back in Genesis 3, God punishes Adam and Eve’s sin with the curse of death and decay. He tells them that life will be hard and then he says two things: First of all he tells the serpent:

And I will cause hostility between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring.  
He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”<sup>167</sup>

Then he tells the woman:

“I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth.  
And you will desire to control your husband but he will rule over you.”<sup>168</sup>

In other words, He foretells conflict and strife. Now, going back even before creation, if we believe in God’s eternity and His future inclusive omniscience, then we will believe that God knew how things would work out even before he created Adam. But even without that kind of foreknowledge, God must have at least known the probabilities and likely outcomes. Now, maybe God was taking a risk, but could hardly complain and throw His toys out of the pram if a predicted set of odds came up. Yet that’s exactly the image of God that we are left with if God’s repentance here means an about change.

The good news is that this isn’t the God we are presented with in Genesis 6. God’s response to sin is to bring catastrophic judgement. The sin of his creatures causes Him grief. Let’s not lose that point. But we also should not miss the point that God does not change His mind about creation and humanity. Through the flood, he delivers animals, birds... and humans. God sticks to plan a.

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<sup>165</sup> The putting up of interdisciplinary borders in commentaries used by preachers and teachers is extremely frustrating and one can’t help feeling a bit of a cop-out. The Biblical scholar does need to engage with and help us answer the doctrinal questions just as the Systematic Theologian cannot be excused for failing to do his homework properly by exegeting texts properly and engaging with Biblical scholarship.

<sup>166</sup> Genesis 4:19.

<sup>167</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>168</sup> Genesis 3:16.

### Genesis 18:16-33 Abraham intercedes for Sodom

Genesis 18 is also often presented as a story about God's potential to change his mind. Although in the end, God goes ahead with the destruction of Sodom, there is a point when he negotiates and re-considers. Originally, He planned to wipe the city out regardless of who was there. Here, He opens His mind to the possibility that there might be some good people worth saving the city for. Sadly, there are not enough good people.

But let's look again. The story is often presented as brave Abraham daring to bargain with God, but is that what happens?

Notice first of all that it is God himself who opens the conversation. As Wenham says:

"It is not that God needs to go down to confirm what he knows, but that he is visiting it with a view to judgement. It sounds like a foregone conclusion ('deserve destruction') but the final 'if not' gives a chink of hope and on this slender hope Abraham bases his plea. 'It is God himself who wants intercession made, and Abraham must be the intercessor' (Jacob, 448-49)." <sup>169</sup>

Then towards the end of the conversation:

"The Lord himself introduces the word 'ruin' in his reply to Abraham, whereas on the previous occasion he had used the more colourless 'do,' perhaps giving a hint that he cannot be pressed much further." <sup>170</sup>

So that

"As the Lord had hinted in v 21 that he wanted intercession for Sodom, so he now closes the prayer by going on his way. It was not, as so often suggested, that Abraham did not have the courage to go further and press his case to the logical conclusion: 'Suppose one is found there....' Rather, God himself had hinted that he should go no further (v 31), and now he terminates the conversation. Nevertheless, Abraham puts the case so strongly against the indiscriminate slaughter of the righteous that every reader must wonder what God will do if there are fewer than ten righteous in Sodom. The narrator too is aware of the problem: the next few scenes, set in the city itself, will show that there are no righteous in Sodom at all, except for Lot, who is only a sojourner there, not a full citizen." <sup>171</sup>

Did you get that? This is not Abraham initiating negotiations to try and change God's mind. God leads Abraham through the conversation. Why does He do that? I believe it is because He wants to teach Abraham several things.

- a. That He truly is righteous and just
- b. That sin is terrible and far reaching
- c. That He is a compassionate and loving God

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<sup>169</sup> Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2. Word, 1987), 51.

<sup>170</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 53.

<sup>171</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 53.

- d. That He is the God who steps in to rescue His people from destruction and judgement.

God looks at Sodom and sees human wickedness and destruction on a scale that grieves Him. He steps in to judge, but even as He does, He warns. Calls out and rescues His righteous man from among all the wicked people. Now where have we seen that before? God is consistent in his actions towards evil and righteousness. His will to judge and to save is demonstrated both through Noah's flood and the rescue of Lot from Sodom.

### **Jeremiah 18: 1-12 The Potter's House**

Richard Rice says:

"The Bible's most extensive account of divine repentance deserves careful attention. As recorded in Jeremiah 18, the Lord sends the prophet to the potter's house, where he observes the man at his wheel, throwing pots and reworking spoiled vessels into other designs. The Lord declares that Israel to him is like clay in the potter's hands. Depending on the circumstances, his plans for Israel can change. He will rework his design in response to the actions of his people."<sup>172</sup>

Now here is JA Thompson in his commentary dealing specifically with verse 4.

"The precise meaning of this verse is crucial to the interpretation. It is commonly held that the work of the potter was an illustration of the fact that Yahweh would work patiently with his people to make of them the 'vessel' he intended them to be. But the inference to be drawn from the verse, and from the more specific application in vv. 7ff., is clearly that the particular clay that lay on the wheel at that time was not suitable for the vessel the potter had designed, that is, the quality of the clay determined what the potter could do with it. He could make something else from the clay, but not the particular vessel he had hoped for. The clay could thus frustrate the potter's original intention and cause him to change it. Yahweh the potter was dealing with a clay that was resistant to his purpose. The quality of the people in some way determined what God might do with them."<sup>173</sup>

This is important because we can overplay the purpose of the metaphor. The aim of the story is not so much to tell us about how God behaves, but to really draw out the danger of Israel's position. Israel (by this time represented by the southern kingdom of Judah) is hardened, rebellious and idolatrous so that:

"They could not be fashioned into the noble shape the potter had intended, at least in the present frame of mind. Only the refining influence of judgement could avail to make them amenable again to the potter's touch."<sup>174</sup>

Now, here is the point. When we read through the Old Testament and when we get to the New Testament and read Jesus' verdict, we realise that God had known Israel's character all along. He did not choose her because she was great or good. Israel was rebellious and idolatrous from the outset. God knew that all along. Yet despite that, He chose her knowing that she would not be suitable for

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<sup>172</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support," 31.

<sup>173</sup> JA Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1980), 433.

<sup>174</sup> Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 435. The point is made in v 11-12.

the job of salvation, knowing that she would have to go through judgement, predestined as an object of wrath and knowing that through the engrafting of Gentile believers into her and through the preservation of a remnant somehow (and at this point in history we still don't know quite how) He would keep his promise not to give up on her.

Bruce Ware says:

“So, what Jeremiah 18:5-10 is presenting is God’s constancy to act in ways that are appropriate to the moral situations that he faces.”<sup>175</sup>

God’s plan was always to mould another pot: where the first pot is one of wrath, this different pot is one of glory and salvation. God didn’t change His plan. God didn’t change his mind. The plan was always Jesus and the Cross, Christ and the Church.

### Jonah

Jonah’s story is well known. A prophet is called to go to Nineveh and tell the people that God is about to destroy them. Instead, he runs in the opposite direction, boards a ship, is thrown overboard in a storm, is swallowed by a big fish, repents, returns to Nineveh, preaches and then heads out of the city to watch the spectacle from a safe distance. The people of Nineveh repent and cry out to God. He relents and does not destroy them. Jonah is angry and bitter at God. He says “This is exactly why I did not want to go to Nineveh in the first place. I knew you would do that.”

Rice says that this is an example of God repenting and changing his mind about something he was going to do.

“When the prophet finally reached the great city after his famous detour at sea, he delivered the message that God had given to him. ‘Forty more days’ he proclaimed, ‘and Nineveh will be overturned’ (Jon 3:4). In response to his dire warning, the entire city fasted and prayed. ‘When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.’ (3:10). This, of course was just what Jonah had feared. ‘I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God,’ he complained, ‘slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity’ (4:2).<sup>176</sup>

But do you notice the big problem with Rice’s use of Jonah? It jumps right off of the page at us. Jonah says “I knew...”

Douglas Stewart in his commentary emphasises the point.

“In fact, Jonah knew very well how Yahweh could do what he had done. He had already known it, but had not wanted to face it.”<sup>177</sup>

So if Jonah knew that that was what God would do, can we really suggest that God didn’t know He was going to do it? Then what is really going on here? Well, a lot depends on how we read the story.

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<sup>175</sup> Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 137.

<sup>176</sup> Rice, “Biblical Support,” 27.

<sup>177</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31. Mexico City. Thomas Nelson, 1987), 502.

Do we read it as God sending a message (“40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed”) fully expecting that to be the outcome, then being surprised by the turn of events and having to change His plans? Or is something else going on?

I want to suggest that Jonah’s story fits with the picture we have already been building up of God. It’s no surprise then that Jonah expects the outcome. Jonah knows that God is compassionate and faithful. He knows that God loves to have mercy, loves to forgive and loves to save. He also knows that God does judge those who do not repent. How does he know this? He knows it because he knows his Old Testament history. This is what God did with Israel. In fact, that’s the point in Jonah. The book is intended to be read by God’s people Israel. It then serves a threefold purpose:

- a. It reminds them of God’s character, His love and His justice. They are reminded of all the times God has sent His prophets to warn them.
- b. It warns them again that they are sinners who need to repent to escape their coming judgement.
- c. It shows them that God’s concern is not just for Israel but for the whole world. They were meant to be a light to the Gentiles.

So what happens in Jonah is that God’s warning of judgement comes with an implicit condition. God will destroy them... unless they repent.<sup>178</sup> God’s very purpose in sending Jonah was so that they would hear and heed the warning. When Jonah tries to get out of it, God persists. God’s plan was to save Nineveh and God accomplished that plan.

So when we look at these examples, we don’t see a God who changes his mind and has to come up with plan B. We see a God who fulfils plan a. Of course his plan includes the actions and intercession of His people, but that does not preclude the possibility that He already knew and had even planned their response.

As Bruce Ware comments:

“There are many cases where one wonders why God even told his prophet or the people what he intended to do. For example, with Nineveh, in the light of its wickedness why did God not simply destroy the city without giving Nineveh a forty-day period of suspended judgement and without sending Jonah to tell them that they had these forty days? Or in Exodus 32, when God observed the people of Israel worshipping the golden calf, why did God not simply destroy the people instead of first telling Moses concerning both their great sin and his intent to vent his anger against them? Since God surely could have acted directly and unilaterally, he purposely chose to involve others in the situation, thus purposely postponing the action he otherwise would have taken. What this allows for, perhaps even invites, is the response of the people who become informed of God’s stated intentions. So when the people of Nineveh hear, they repent. When Moses hears, he earnestly prays. It appears then, that God’s purpose is to involve others, planning that he will ‘change’ when they have acted in the ways he has anticipated they will and given opportunity for them to do.”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 136.

<sup>179</sup> Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 93.

## **Why does all this matter**

Well, shortly we are going to reflect in more detail about the pastoral implications of what we've discovered about God and his character, but I want to just highlight something very important here.

Open Theism's aim is to get us to see that God is love and to emphasise the importance of our relationship with Him. That's a good aim, but I think it is better realised when we acknowledge that God does not change and is not malleable to our emotions and responses.

Why? Well, if God changes his mind, then our aim in prayer will often be to get Him to do just that. If my friend is ill in hospital, then I will pray for their recovery with a mind-set which says:

“My friend is ill and God is either unaware of this, not actively involved or even intentionally causing the suffering. Therefore, when I pray, I hope to get God's attention and persuade Him to change His mind.”

Now, when I know that God does not change, then I approach prayer differently. Instead, I should think:

“My friend is ill and God is fully aware and fully involved in this situation. I don't understand God's purpose here, but I know that it will be for His glory and our good. Therefore, I want to speak honestly to God, telling him about how I feel and what I would like to see happen. I can do that knowing that God is present, engaged and involved and proactively is drawing in my involvement through prayer. As I pray, I can expect to gain a greater insight into God's purpose here. Even better still, I will gain a deeper insight into God Himself and His character.”

Prayer is suddenly not about request lists, not about negotiating. Prayer is about a relationship. It's about getting to know God better. It's about experiencing his love and care for us on a deeper level. It's about expressing our love, trust and confidence in him.

So how we think about God will affect our relationship with Him. It will affect our trust in Him, not just about how we talk about Him but how we talk to Him. God's goodness and sovereignty should help us to enjoy our relationship with Him, trusting Him, talking with Him, relying on Him, resting in Him.

## 20 God in the dock: objections to his greatness and goodness (part 2)

The second big objection to God's goodness and God's greatness we are going to look at is atheism. This says that if we have a problem with saying that God is good or that God is great, then the better option is to deny both: to say that God is neither good nor great. In fact, such a God does not exist at all.

Note that there are two dimensions to this discussion.

1. The requirement for proof of the existence of God and particularly the clash between modern theories about origins and the Bible's creation account.
2. Ethical questions about the God defined and described in the Bible and seen as representative of monotheism. The atheist argument (especially as presented by the new atheists, including Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens is that the biblical God is not good and not worthy of worship.

A normal theism/atheism debate will focus on the first question, but that's not my primary concern here as our discussion starts from a different place. Also there's plenty of both young earth and old earth creationists around who have been getting on with that debate.

Our focus here is more about thinking through the implications of and challenges to the little bit of doctrine we've been looking at. So I want to focus primarily on the challenge to God's goodness.

However, we can't completely ignore question 1 even in this context. So, before moving on to the specific questions about God's goodness raised by atheists, we'll take a brief look at questions to do with proof of his existence.<sup>180</sup>

### **If God exists why doesn't he show up and prove it?**

This is really about demanding evidence or proof for God's existence. Classical apologetics talks about these proofs or arguments under headings such as the ontological, teleological and cosmological arguments.

So the argument goes that there must be a greater intelligence to explain the design, beauty and order in the Universe, that the Universe must have come from somewhere and so there must have been a first cause and that if we can conceive of a perfect being, then its very perfection depends upon it actually existing.

Now, there are some significant issues with starting with these arguments and I don't think that they should be treated as proof in the sense of "here's the killer evidence." I say this for three reasons.

1. Evidence is usually interpretable and even faced with "evidence" people may choose not to accept that it is telling them what you think it is telling them.

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<sup>180</sup> NB We will also come back to it later on when we look at the question of creation.

2. Something feels wrong with this type of argument by proofs because I end up debating God as a theory/hypothesis – but that's not what you do with people/friends. You introduce friends to other friends.
3. We end up falling far short of where we want to be. The classical arguments don't get us to the God of the Bible. We conclude with Anthony Flew that there is a higher entity, but exactly what sort of god is that? We are still a long way from the Gospels.

So someone who doesn't believe in God or want to believe in God is unlikely to be either convinced by the "evidence" or end up in the right place. And I still think that whilst the "goodness" challenge exists then for some people, their immediate response will be "even if you could prove your God exists, I still would not want to meet him."

However, I think they do provide two important functions. First, of all, they offer an articulation of the assurance that believers have that the God they know and worship is real. Secondly, they help to explain the picture we are building up of a credible narrative for why we are here and who we are where that narrative starts with the creator God.

You see, that's what we are doing here. We're attempting to tell the history of why we are here. Now, what historians do is to assemble the most credible story that best explains the data we have.

So if my story or metanarrative is that there is an eternal and personal God who created and sustains the universe, then when I talk about things like evidence of design or the need for a first cause, then those things fit with the story.

Or, take the ontological argument associated with Anselm. This would look like the weakest of the classical proofs. This is the proof that says if we can conceive of a perfect being, then an important aspect of perfection is existence. Now at face value, that just sounds like wish fulfilment. Just because I imagine or wish for a perfect being does not mean that such a perfect being exists.

However, I think that the argument, rightly understood and used does touch on something important. No, it's not a very helpful argument to put forward in debate. No-one's going to say "Oh yes, I can imagine something perfect but if it didn't exist, it wouldn't be perfect. God must be real!" However, what this proof is doing is expressing our sense of the transcendent – that there must be more than this. It's expressing, a sense or feeling that many people readily identify with. Now of course, it remains the case that the desire for something more could still be all to do with wish fulfilment and so it still does not function as an apologetic proof in that sense. However, that sense of "something more" or transcendence fits with what we know about ourselves. What we observe about human behaviour aligns with the meta-narrative of a creator God. Furthermore, if my natural desires for food, comfort, relationships etc. arise in response to real needs that can be met by real food, comfort, relationships, then why shouldn't my desire for the transcendent reflect a real need for something/someone more and a need that can really be fulfilled?

Now, if that's the Christian/theistic account of why we are here, Atheism presents an alternative account based on Evolution. This story tells us that we evolved without a personal God being



involved. It starts with a primeval soup of gases and then, something starts to happen, causing chemical reactions and the formation of molecules.<sup>181</sup> Then one day:

“At some point a particularly remarkable molecule was formed by accident. We will call it the Replicator. It may not be necessarily have been the biggest or most complex molecule around, but it had the extraordinary property of being able to create copies of itself. This may seem a very unlikely sort of accident to happen. So it was. It was exceedingly improbable. In the lifetime of a man, things that are that improbable can be treated for practical purposes as impossible. That is why you will never win a big prize on the football pools. But in our human estimates of what is probable and what is not, we are used to dealing in hundreds of millions of years. If you filled in pools coupons every week for a hundred million years you would very likely win several jackpots.”<sup>182</sup>

But there’s still a vital ingredient missing or we’d just have lots of identical molecules around busy cloning each other.

“So we seem to arrive at a large population of identical replicas. But now we must mention an important property of any copying process: it is not perfect. Mistakes will happen.”<sup>183</sup>

Richard Dawkins goes on to explain:

“erratic copying in biological replicators can in a real sense give rise to improvement, and it was essential for the progressive evolution of life that some errors were made.”<sup>184</sup>

Variation in numbers, longevity and stability mean some replicators are better equipped to survive than others.<sup>185</sup> These replicators are found in us now:

“Now they swarm in huge colonies safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by tortuous, indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control. They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind, and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes and we are their survival machines.”<sup>186</sup>

Now, that’s a fascinating story, but it has a big problem because it starts with time, but fails to give account for eternity. In other words, time and matter came from somewhere. You see, every account of the Universe has got to put that Universe into context – where and when are we in the bigger scheme of things. Every meta-narrative has to deal with what happened before the beginning of space and time. Every story needs to deal with eternity.

Atheists have two real options. The first is that there was a when, when there was nothing, in which case, they’ve still got to explain how that primordial soup turned up. Or alternatively, they’ve got to say that matter itself is eternal, that there’s been some form of energy around in what we might call

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<sup>181</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 14.

<sup>182</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 15.

<sup>183</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 16.

<sup>184</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 16.

<sup>185</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 17.

<sup>186</sup> Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 20.

the “previ-verse.”<sup>187</sup> Now, that sounds very close to pantheism – the idea that God and creation are one and the same. In fact, Dawkins draws a similar sort of conclusion. When dealing with reports of famous scientists supposedly believing in or referring to God, he responds by saying that first of all we want to define what we mean by God. He defines the theist’s God as

“a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his main work of creating the universe in the first place is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation. In many theistic belief systems, the deity is intimately involved in human affairs. He answers prayers; forgives or punishes sins; intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even think of doing them).”<sup>188</sup>

He then distinguishes theism from deism.

“A deist too believes in a supernatural intelligence, but one whose activities were confined to setting up the laws that govern the universe in the first place. The deist God never intervenes thereafter, and certainly has no specific interest in human affairs.”<sup>189</sup>

Then finally he describes pantheism:

“Pantheists don’t believe in a supernatural God at all, but use the word God as a non-supernatural synonym for Nature, or the Universe, or for the lawfulness that governs its workings.”<sup>190</sup>

In Dawkins’ view, when people like Einstein and Stephen Hawking refer to God, they do so in the pantheist sense.

“Einstein was using ‘God’ in a purely metaphorical, poetic sense. So is Stephen Hawking and so are most of those physicists who occasionally slip into the language of religious metaphor.”<sup>191</sup>

He goes on to say that it is the theist God, not the pantheist God, that he has a problem with,

“My title, *The God Delusion*, does not refer to the God of Einstein and other enlightened scientists of the previous section. That is why I needed to get Einsteinian religion out of the

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<sup>187</sup> This leads into a more detailed discussion around The Big Bang and when, how, if the Universe had a start point. So for example, Stephen Hawking tends to talk about the Universe as finite but without a boundary - similar to how we think about the earth in terms of space. His explanations are a little difficult to pin down - maybe because he is still working through a thought process and maybe because that thought process is of one very clever quantum physicist! So there seems to be a tension within his own thinking with the start of time in some sense at the big time and the Universe in some sense being self-existence. We of course have the challenge of the world renowned physicist accommodating their language to communicate with the likes of me. So for example, when Hawking talks about time being finite but unbounded like the Earth, then I think “quite. Of course you can walk around the world without falling off of it. However that doesn’t mean there isn’t something beyond it. The earth being finite sits in a context and there is something beyond.” This is probably something for greater discussion when we move to the Creation theme in due course. (c.f. <http://www.hawking.org.uk/the-origin-of-the-universe.html> and <http://www.hawking.org.uk/the-beginning-of-time.html> both cited 16-04-2016).

<sup>188</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 39.

<sup>189</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 39.

<sup>190</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 39.

<sup>191</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 40.

way to begin with: it has a proven capacity to confuse. In the rest of the book I am talking only about supernatural gods, of which the most familiar to the majority of my readers will be Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.”<sup>192</sup>

Now, note that Dawkins’ pantheism is intended to be only metaphorical. He’s not saying that the Universe is divine in the same way that a theist would use the word divine. Mind you, I’m not convinced that a purist pantheist would accept that their understanding of divinity in creation is purely metaphorical either! However, what he is doing is setting up the Universe around us, physical matter, as the ultimate foundational entity.

But the problem hasn’t been dealt with. You see, this account does not make best sense of things like intelligence, emotions, personality, relationships etc. So we’ve either got a dilemma because the cause does not seem to fit the effect, or we have to explain away emotions and intelligence as not really existing at all, which no-one seems quite able to bring themselves round to doing.

So when I’m looking for a credible metanarrative, I don’t find that the “atheistic evolution” story hangs together. It doesn’t make sense of the things it is meant to make sense of. For example, we talk about “evolutionary progress,” but without a sense that there’s a standard to measure how we are doing against and a goal to go towards. So then the idea of progress becomes meaningless. It’s like taking a walk without either a map or an intended destination. You can’t call that “progress.” It’s just wandering around!

In fact, this is what we’ve seen in recent times. That metanarrative collapsed. If ontologically everything is random, if we are just here by chance, then epistemologically things end up the same way too. We find that we can’t actually tell a story to describe who we are, why we got here and what we are doing. The metanarrative collapses. Stories and even language itself become arbitrary. That’s why you end up with postmodernism.

You see, the story in the end is not about humanity at all, but about these things called genes that replicate and mutate and supposedly do what they need to in order to survive – but no one can actually tell me why these genes should exist or want to keep on existing. There is no meaning to existence. So I think that the other story carries more credibility; I do better to go back to revelation.

Then, supposing that the answer to the question “if God exists, why doesn’t he prove it? – why doesn’t he show up?” is “Well, he has.”

That’s the Christian view of Jesus. God shows up. God becomes man and lives among us. Jesus displays God’s wisdom with his teaching, God’s love with his compassion for us and obedience to his father; Jesus shows God’s power in his miracles. He calms the sea, heals the sick and he himself dies and rises.

If we are going to make this claim, then the focus is going to be on the question “can we be certain that Jesus really did live, die and rise again?” The resurrection becomes the crucial factor (which is what the Gospel writers understand as well).

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<sup>192</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 41.

Now, we know about Jesus and the resurrection through the Gospel accounts, so a subsidiary question will be “can we actually trust those accounts to be reliable?” Space here doesn’t permit a full discussion of the question, but it is worth noting the following.

1. External evidence is helpful when seeking to date and get a feel for the reliability of the Gospels. This includes the volume of manuscripts available and their close proximity to the original events which compare favourably with other historical events. It also includes external reference to Gospel authors by other writers.<sup>193</sup>
2. Internal evidence that helps us to identify the context in which books were written. For example, when dating Luke and Acts, we note that Acts finishes prior to Peter and Paul’s deaths. It would be legitimate for the writer to deal with those events without compromising an early dating of them. Therefore, the most likely explanation is that those events had not yet taken place when Luke and Acts were written. Similarly, JAT Robinson has argued that the Gospel and other New Testament writers’ handling of Jesus’ words concerning Jerusalem and the Temple suggest that they are writing prior to the actual fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>194</sup>

So, we can have a high level of confidence that when we pick up the New Testament, we are dealing with credible eyewitness accounts.<sup>195</sup> Additionally, because of the way those accounts work, there’s strong evidence that we are dealing with genuine, independent eye witnesses with their own accounts to tell, not with a group of people that colluded to concoct a story.

This means that we find each Gospel author making use of each other’s written material.<sup>196</sup> At the same time, they pick up on and emphasise different aspects of the story. They do this in a way that does not contradict, but rather each piece of material supplements and adds to the other.

Now, when we come to the resurrection accounts, some alternative theories have been presented to try and account for the empty tomb. These include

**Swoon** – Jesus wasn’t really dead when they placed him in the tomb and so revived overnight. This seems unlikely. The Romans had a good track record for executing people and the piercing of Jesus’ side appears to have gone through to his internal organs. Additionally, someone who has been through a crucifixion and just about survived is unlikely to make a convincing resurrected Messiah.

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<sup>193</sup> NB For interest, see the very interesting discussion on Carston Peter Theide 7 Matthew D’Ancona, *The Jesus Papyrus* (1994) and Carston Peter Thiede, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish origins of Christianity* (2003). The debate and discussion that followed these publications demonstrates the challenge of evaluating and interpreting evidence including archaeological data.

<sup>194</sup> See for example, JAT Robinson, *Redating The New Testament* (London. SCM, 1976).

<sup>195</sup> For a fuller discussion of this question check out FF Bruce, *The New Testament Documents are they Reliable* (1943) and Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (1987).

<sup>196</sup> There appear to be a couple of common sources underpinning the text of what we call the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke). Some scholars refer to a hypothetical source called Q though whether or not this was a specific collection of writings or simply reflects that either Matthew or Luke had access to the other’s account is debatable. Additionally, both Matthew and Luke appear to make use Mark’s material though it is not simply a case of copying across.

***Fraud*** – That the body was stolen. But by who and to what purpose? It doesn't really suit the aims of Jesus' rivals and his supporters stuck quite consistently to their story even under the threat of torture, exile and execution.

***Superstition and hallucination*** – The problem with this is that the women and the disciples are not looking for a resurrected Jesus. In fact, they assume to start with that one of the other explanations is the reason for the disappeared body.

So these alternative explanations have been comprehensively answered over the years. I guess that the final explanation is "myth:" that it's an attempt to tell a story to explain things and provide the basis for a new religion. Now such an approach assumes a couple of things. First of all, that the accounts were written long after the supposed life of Jesus (see above on this) and that they don't stand up to the test of historical reliability. In other words, the argument is that the gospel writers did not do a good job of inventing their story; that the stories don't really match up.

Now, eye witnesses, if they are not colluding, won't sound exactly the same – but they shouldn't contradict each other and whilst harmonisation of different eye witness accounts may be difficult, it should not be impossible.

Personally, I think it a strange idea that an editor would clumsily shove together contradictory accounts and in any case, I do think you can put a harmonised version of the whole story together. This would run something along the lines of the following:

Very early in the morning, some women go to the tomb. Mary Magdalene is one of them. It looks like they set off before dawn and dawn is breaking as they arrive. They arrive about the time that the stone is removed. There are angels there. The women run back and tell Peter and John that the stone has been moved and the body gone. Peter and John run to the tomb and witness this as well. This leads John towards some form of belief, but Peter is still wondering what is going on. Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb and there the angels speak to her – she's still weeping and in distress, but then, turning around, she meets Jesus. He sends her to speak to the others.<sup>197</sup>

During the day, Jesus appears to two disciples going back to Emmaus and then at some point to Peter. Then he appears to the gathered disciples – collectively referred to as the 11 but without Thomas at this point. They report to Thomas – he does not believe. Jesus appears to all the disciples with Thomas now present.

They are instructed to go to Galilee. This includes a fishing trip and a walk up a mountain where they are commissioned to go and make disciples of all nations. They then return to Jerusalem. Jesus meets them at Bethany. They go out to a hill from where he ascends to Heaven. They return into Jerusalem and worship at the Temple.

Now there are a couple of things to note here.

- a. That each account does not name all the people or give all the details – but there's consistency. For example, there are multiple women with Mary Magdalene standing out as a notable representative (it's possible even in John's gospel that Mary's use of "we" refers to

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<sup>197</sup> She is possibly accompanied by the other women – see later comments and notes.

the women together. Although John does not list all the women, that does not mean that they were absent.

- b. That in some places there are multiple options for the exact chronology of events. For example, it's possible that Matthew tells us about one conversation with angels and it's later repeated to Mary, but it's also possible that all the women return to the tomb with Mary and that Matthew concentrates the story down so that he doesn't over distinguish between the first visit to the tomb and the second.
- c. The different accounts give different amounts of space and detail so some things will get summarised up in different ways. This can be seen in an analysis of the amount of detail that each author goes into. A quick word count using the NIV version shows that each writer's account gives the following amount of space to the Resurrection story.
  - i. Matthew 435 words
  - ii. Mark 186 words
  - iii. Luke Acts 1326 words
  - iv. John 1,455 words
- d. That none of the accounts give a full description of everything that happens. For example, the appearance to Peter is alluded to, but not described and then there's the 500 witnesses that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15.

So a little bit of work and thinking may be needed from the reader in piecing together the eye witnesses, but notice that at no point does one account contradict the others. They complement each other.

So, returning to our best fit meta-narrative, we can say that there's an eternal and personal God who made, orders and looks after this world. That this world shows all the hallmarks of design, order, beauty that you would expect if a good God had made it. That this good God shows up consistently through history and is not at a distance, but interacts with his creation – most notably in the person of Jesus who demonstrates power over creation, weather, sickness, resources and authority over life and death itself. We also see that we human beings recognise in ourselves an inner longing for something greater and beyond ourselves. We are aware of eternity. We are designed to worship.

The point is that this world view works. The story is consistent and coherent and the truth claims associated enable us to make sense of the big questions we ask including:

Where did this world come from?  
Why am I here?  
Is there more than this?  
Do I have purpose/a future?

Which leads us into the second part of the discussion – is the God revealed in Scripture good or malign?

### **Atheism and God's goodness**

<sup>198</sup>“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>199</sup>

That’s Richard Dawkins’ verdict on Yahweh. And if you think he’s just got a problem with the Old Testament then it’s worth noting that the New Atheists have just as big (if not bigger) a problem with the New Testament.<sup>200</sup> Now, not every atheist will have read “The God Delusion” and not everyone claims to share his approach to debating on faith. However, this statement is important because I would suggest that it is representative of a major objection to the Christian claim that God is good. So, it’s right that we engage with it.

Firstly, it’s important at this stage to note that Dawkins is making a series of moral judgements here. He is saying that if there is something called goodness, then God does not possess or show it. So, a major part of our discussion needs to focus on the following questions:

1. What is morality and does morality really exist?
2. Where does morality come from?

Remember that one of the key things we should be thinking about as we go along is whether our answers to these questions are consistent, fit within and support our worldview or whether we give inconsistent answers and/or undermine our worldview.

We are back to presuppositions again. Presuppositions are the foundational beliefs that we have on which our worldview sits. Generally speaking, if you challenge my individual beliefs and find evidence to prove me wrong, unless you actually demolish the foundations and show that my underpinning pre-suppositions are wrong, I’m unlikely to change my mind and more likely to simply find new explanations that fit within the overarching framework of my belief system.

### **Morality - is it real?**

What we immediately see here is that Dawkins is making a moral assessment of the Christian God. He attributes a number of negative characteristics and actions to God. Now, I am a little curious about this. Does Dawkins mean that there really are right and wrong motives or does he simply mean that here are a set of standards that Christians would claim are moral and by their own standards, their God fails?

It is right to ask the question “is there really something that we can genuinely call morality?” What do I mean by this? Well, here are a few examples of moral qualities: love, mercy, compassion, kindness etc. Now, I can say that yes I agree, love exists, that a real action (compassion) happens because of an emotion I experience (love) and that the action results in a further sense of well-

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<sup>198</sup> NB. I’m choosing Richard Dawkins as a conversation partner because he is an example of an atheist thinker and writer who is reasonably well known and widely read. I understand that not every atheist will have read Dawkins, come to their conclusions because of him or even agree with every aspect of his reasoning and approach. However, it’s good to start somewhere. Dawkins himself takes time to explain when and why he disagrees with others who would be broadly in the atheist evolution camp.

<sup>199</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 50.

<sup>200</sup> See for example Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 109-122.

being. However, there is a big difference between seeing “love” as a moral quality and seeing it as a label to describe chemical processes. The difference here is about “is and ought.”

What do I mean by this? Well, I am constantly able to observe how people, animals and plants function. I know that in certain conditions certain creatures will normally perform in certain ways - they’ll respond to the environment around them. That’s what we mean by “is”.

However, saying that things do happen does not mean that they should happen. We can say that something “is” the case but we also want to talk about what “ought” to be the case. For example, if you are a Tottenham Hotspurs fan, then the difference between “is” and “ought” would be obvious. You might think that Spurs *ought* to have won the Premier League in 2016. However, the real situation *is* that Leicester won the title. Or to give another example, take someone who runs a business using dodgy and maybe even criminal methods. You might say that he *is* successful and making lots of money but he *ought* to be found out and locked up in prison.

It’s the same when we look at the wider world around us. We can observe how the world functions, how animals behave towards each other, how humans treat one another. You will observe that certain behaviours tend to have certain consequences. You will observe a world where some people do well and others don’t. You will observe a world where there is pain and suffering as well as joy. That’s what the world *is* like but *ought* it to be like that?

How do we tell the difference between “is” and “ought”? Well, medical treatment offers some clues. we know that some people respond physically to stimuli that should cause pleasure or a neutral reaction, but in fact they experience pain. Now on a small scale I know that the “is” here isn’t the “ought”. Medical diagnosis depends on distinguishing the two. A doctor will then compare my experience of pain to two things, first of all he will look wider and finds out what is the experience of the rest of the population. Secondly, he looks deeper and finds out what my past experience is by looking at my medical history.

So to distinguish between “is” and “ought” we need to see the bigger picture. But if we are looking at how the whole Universe behaves can we do that? Is there something bigger to look to? Where do we get our terms of reference from? How do we know that particular behaviours are right or wrong, especially if they appear to be common to much of humanity? For example, Slavery has been common and persistent throughout history in some form or other. Does that mean we should just accept it?<sup>201</sup>

Then what do we do if there is more than one “is”? What happens if we observe a number of different practices around the world? For example, how do I choose between capitalism, communism and feudalism? I really have three choices

- a. I could say that one system is right and the other two are wrong.
- b. I could say that all of the systems are wrong and we need to keep searching for the right one.
- c. Or we could say that none of the systems are necessarily right or wrong. All we can say is that each system exists.

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<sup>201</sup> Note, to save heated debate, my own answer to that is “no.” If you are interested in the history of the abolitionist movement in Britain, you may find my little booklet “John Wesley and the Abolition of the slave trade (Unpublished, 2008) of interest.



If we take the third option, then we are saying that it is impossible to identify an “ought.” All we can do is describe what is the case. Now, this is a perfectly logical conclusion for atheists to come to. If all we have is the Universe around us, then there is nothing greater than it, nothing beyond or outside of it. We have one way of telling how things “ought” to be. All we can do is describe how things are.

This is in effect a logical conclusion of belief that the foundational absolute is matter. Words like love, justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, retribution, restoration really are just words to describe the reality. They are just labels for observable chemical processes and interactions between organisms but we should not load them with any value.

The problem is that not many people really want to do this. Generally speaking, people want to talk about goodness and morality. Generally speaking, as well, we tend to talk about evolution in terms of progress. It’s not just that things change, mutations are meant to lead to improvements.

### **Where do we get our morality from?**

#### Ethical Approaches – an important piece of the jigsaw

John Frame identifies three main approaches to ethics: existential, teleological (or situational) and deontological.

*Existential Ethics* tend to be subjective, “they focus on ethics as a phenomenon of the internal life”<sup>202</sup> meaning that “a good act comes from a good character.”<sup>203</sup> Modern politicians often rely on this approach: we are expected to trust their policies because they are good and honourable men and women.<sup>204</sup> The problem with this approach is that it is subjective. It is dependent upon individual conscience about right and wrong. How can anyone challenge what I do, especially if I believe myself to be essentially wise and good?

Frame does note though that:

“No thinker is an absolutely pure example of any of these three tendencies. The reason is that ethics by its very nature requires all three perspectives. One can try to reject a perspective, but it always shows up somewhere. So, in secular existential ethics, our inner subjectivity is made to play all three roles; motive, goal and standard.”<sup>205</sup>

The second ethical tradition described by Frame is *Teleological Ethics*.

“This term comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means ‘goal’ or ‘purpose.’ This tradition understands ethics as a selection of goals and of means to reach those goals. In the secular version, the goal is usually human happiness or, more narrowly, pleasure.”<sup>206</sup>

This leads to a lot of discussion about how we know what a good goal is. Utilitarianism will argue that we should weigh up what brings the greatest joy or happiness, but that leads to further

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<sup>202</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 74.

<sup>203</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 74.

<sup>204</sup> Ironically at a point in history when we are less and less inclined to believe that they are that!

<sup>205</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 75.

<sup>206</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 91.

questions. For example, what if I pursue maximum pleasure for me at the expense of pain to others? The answer to that one may sound simple, but then, what if we pursue pleasure for a majority of people, but that results in severe pain for a minority?

The third approach is called *Deontological Ethics*. This is about a concern for objective rules or principles. Frame says that:

“Deontologists tend to be contemptuous of people who do good in order to gain pleasure or happiness or to express their inner inclinations. In the deontological view, seeking happiness is never morally virtuous; indeed, it detracts from the moral quality of any action. So when a writer despises pleasure and exalts principle or self-sacrifice, he is probably a deontologist.”<sup>207</sup>

How do we determine what those rules are? Well, a theist is likely to identify those rules as being given by God. However, an atheist does not have (and may not want) that option. Also, we cannot go on subjective feelings or benefits. So as Frame explains, because

“Deontologists seek to find ethical norms that are universal, necessary and obligatory. They usually accept the argument of Hume, Moore, and others that such norms cannot be found through sense experience (as in teleological ethics) or introspection (as in existential ethics).” The problem set before the deontologist, therefore, is to find some other source of ethical knowledge.”<sup>208</sup>

### Dawkins’ Ethics

So how does Richard Dawkins engage with ethics? It’s important that we go back to his basic starting point: the selfish gene. In Dawkins’ worldview, our essential purpose is to provide vehicles for genetic reproduction. The Gene functions selfishly in that its concern is self-preservation.

So, does this remove the possibility of altruism? Dawkins argues that no it doesn’t because it is the gene that is ‘selfish’ because that’s what it needs to preserve, but just because the lowest common denominator is defined as ‘selfish’, it does not mean that everything else is ‘selfish’ around it.

“It is necessary to put the emphasis on the right word. The selfish gene is the correct emphasis, for it makes the contrast with the selfish organism or the selfish species.”<sup>209</sup>

The gene itself needs to be ‘selfish’ because

“The logic of Darwinism concludes that the unit in the hierarchy of life which survives and passes through the filter of natural selection will tend to be selfish. The units that survive in the world will be the ones that succeeded in surviving at the level of their rivals at their own level in the hierarchy. That precisely, is what selfishness means in this context.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 101.

<sup>208</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 101.

<sup>209</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 246

<sup>210</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 246

Dawkins does acknowledge that this 'selfishness' will extend beyond the gene. However, this is not guaranteed to be always and uniformly the case.

"The most obvious way in which genes ensure their own selfish survival relative to other genes is by programming individual organisms to be selfish. There are indeed many circumstances in which survival of the individual organism will favour the survival of the genes that ride inside it. But different circumstances favour different tactics. There are circumstances –not particularly rare – in which genes ensure their own selfish survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically"<sup>211</sup>

He then goes on to discuss a number of circumstances in which organisms and communities may discover good reasons for acting altruistically in a way that supports the survival of the selfish gene. He concludes:

"We now have four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic, generous or 'moral' to each other. First, there is the special case of genetic kinship. Second, there is reciprocation: the repayment of favours given, and the giving of favours in 'anticipation' of payback. Following on from this there is, third, the Darwinian benefit of acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness. And fourth, If Zahavi is right; there is the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising."<sup>212</sup>

Essentially, Dawkins argues for a form of game theory where the game players "start out being nice, and give others the benefit of the doubt. Then repay good deeds with good but avenge bad deeds."<sup>213</sup> He does, however, also acknowledge the problem that "there will always be cheats, and stable solutions to the game theoretic conundrums of reciprocal altruism always involve an element of punishment of cheats."<sup>214</sup>

Now, I want to suggest that Dawkins' ethics are essentially located within the teleological tradition. We do good for the good of something, but note that it's specifically for the good of the gene which may not necessarily be or at least feel like the same thing as "my good/ wellbeing," although the two things could well coalesce. In fact, because it is the gene itself which functions at the teleological level, then I am still likely to experience the other two forms of ethics.<sup>215</sup> For example, in order to safeguard its future, the gene may generate a number of neurological processes intended to give me a sense of honour if I carry out actions aligned with the gene's well-being. Alternatively, individuals and communities may learn to live by certain seemingly arbitrary rules that on the one hand don't appear to deliver happiness or pleasure to the individuals or the community, but do ensure survival at the genetic level.

Now arguably, the implication is that my action's true end goal is to serve the needs of something other than either myself or even those others who are the immediate recipient of my altruism. In fact, this is always true when your world view is founded on anything that is not a-se. In other words,

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<sup>211</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 247.

<sup>212</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 251.

<sup>213</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 249.

<sup>214</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 249.

<sup>215</sup> Noting Frame's comment above that all three are always present in some form.

I live to serve someone or something who is dependent upon me. The observant reader will realise that this is the alternative to grace.

It's interesting that most creation or origins myths revolve around the needs of the gods. They create either to win battles with each other, by accident in some tragic way or in order to create servants and food for themselves. This is why I suggest that the alternative to the Bible's account of God and creation means that I am no more than an accidental by-product of the gods' agenda. In effect, Dawkins' origins story does the same, only it is the genes that take the place of the gods. We become the accidental by-products of gene survival.<sup>216</sup>

Dawkins' creation story does the same. It's fascinating that the Bible's creation story subverts this. God does not create out of need – but he does create intentionally. We are not an accidental by-product.

### Evaluating Dawkins

I want to suggest the following problems with Dawkins' account

1. Dawkins still hasn't really explained why altruism should work – why would we end up with that model (especially if the foundational building blocks are selfish)?
2. If altruism is right, then why do you end up with selfish people? Why would someone go rogue and if altruism is what we truly need, then shouldn't evolution eliminate the faulty alternatives? Or, if it doesn't, then doesn't that suggest it is somehow very inefficient?
3. In the end, even when we follow altruistic means, then it does not follow that we ever can do that for genuine altruistic reasons – we are at heart selfish because our genes are selfish. Even when I do act altruistically, I'm primarily playing a waiting game to see how things will play out and where and when I might need to play nasty. I am, at heart, a selfish being. In effect, what we have is a form of original sin, but not recognised as such and without the possibility of salvation. I am really a slave to my genes. Really all any of us are doing is bidding our time in the game.

Finally, even Dawkins doesn't really convince himself that morality has a real place in the process. It may well be

“that our Good Samaritan urges are misfirings, analogous to the misfiring of a reed warbler's parental instincts when it works itself to the bone for a young cuckoo. An even closer analogy is the human urge to adopt a child, I must rush to add that ‘misfiring’ is intended in only a strictly Darwinian sense. It carries no suggestion of the pejorative.”<sup>217</sup>

In other words, Dawkins may be able to give an explanation for why we do good to those who are in a position to do good back to us. But why should we give when we don't get anything back? Why should we serve without being noticed or rewarded? Why should we love those whom we don't seem to have any real responsibility to?

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<sup>216</sup> NB when referring to accidents here, I am not referring to whether or not evolution is about chance, but rather that human life, including our ability to think and feel, is a side product of the primary process, not the main intention.

<sup>217</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 232.

Dawkins ends up saying that these emotions and compulsions are mistakes, errors in our genetic makeup. I still think that this is the most consistent and coherent conclusion to Dawkins' account of origins. Mind you, I would suggest that if our primary purpose is to enable the survival of genes, then any suggestion of "misfiring" must, within a Dawkinsian worldview, be pejorative. It cannot be anything other.

So, in the end, Dawkins cannot really give a coherent account for why we should be moral. Not only that, I don't find his account for why we are moral all that convincing either. Not only has failed to justify the 'ought' but he also failed to coherently explained the 'is'.

Now, part of our discussion is quite rightly about challenging atheist positions to see if they can give a reasonable account for morality, but we still also have to deal with the question "Is the Christian account moral?"

### **Morality and the Christian account of God**

So how does the God revealed in Scripture and worshipped by Christians do when it comes to the morality question? Once again, we are back to the question of evil and suffering and why a good God can permit these things to happen. Now, there are two charges to respond to here. The first is that if there is a sovereign God supreme over everything, then he is the cause of evil and suffering. That's the kind of big or meta philosophical question. The second one is that when you look at the Bible and the description of what God says and does, then he doesn't actually come out of it too well: that his actions are immoral and unloving against the very standards that the Bible sets.

I want to spend a little bit of time exploring the first question a little bit further. It is something that we will need to come back to again and again as we explore the big questions about who God is, who we are and why we are here. So, there will be other bites of the cherry if we don't get to grips with everything here. At the same time, we won't want to deny that this is a big and a difficult question. Theodicy is the big question that theologians and philosophers have wrestled with down through the ages. So, it would be slightly arrogant of us to think we'll get this one done and dusted in one article here. I also think that it's a good thing to say "I don't know" some, if not a lot, of the time.

### **Attempts to explain evil and suffering**

In "Evil and the Cross", Henri Blocher identifies three categories of explanation for suffering. These are "The solution by universal order"<sup>218</sup>, "The solution by autonomous freedom"<sup>219</sup> and "The solution by dialectical reasoning."<sup>220</sup> Let's take each in turn.

By "The solution by universal order", Blocher means those theodicies<sup>221</sup> where evil is seen to have a place in the progress of creation and humanity.

"To the angry or anguished question, 'Why?' asked by human beings confronted with evil, Christian thinkers had to find an answer. The one most often put forward, at least in ancient

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<sup>218</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 19.

<sup>219</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 36.

<sup>220</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 65.

<sup>221</sup> A theodicy is a theory or explanation for suffering and evil.

times and in the great periods in the history of the church, is closely related to optimism. Moreover it reflects the influence of philosophies that we have classified under the heading 'optimism', such as Stoicism and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus. The strategy consists of erasing or blurring the most scandalous aspects of evil, and choosing a perspective which appears to diminish the anomaly. It is rather as if the existence of evil and the goodness of God are the two lips of a wound that have to be brought together, and you must find as many clips as possible – the clips being in this case the rational considerations that suggest harmony."<sup>222</sup>

From this perspective, the seriousness and extent of evil is in effect played down. In fact, it is literally reduced down to nothingness or 'non-being.'

This "explanation of the origin and the function of evil rests on an interpretation of the nature of evil that roots it in finitude. Every creature is finite, it does not possess being in all its fullness; therefore there may be detected in it a lack of being, the mark of non-being."<sup>223</sup>

The point here is that God did not cause or create evil, at least not in the same way as he created the heavens and the earth and formed animals and people. Evil is the absence of goodness, the absence or limit of the things God has created. For example, "Blindness is the absence of sight, injustice is the absence of justice, lies or error are the absence of truth."<sup>224</sup> One proponent of such a position, Teilhard De Chardin, treats evil as "the waste product of evolution."<sup>225</sup>

We have already met the idea that evil's existence has its roots in autonomous freedom because it is the position of open theists. Indeed, this is probably the best known and widely used of all the arguments. As well as open theism, variants of this approach are found in the writings of CS Lewis, Francis Schaeffer and Rob Bell. Blocher comments that, "This explanation of the problem of evil through freedom is presented in a wide variety of forms, some highly speculative, others commonplace and popular."<sup>226</sup>

In autonomous freedom based arguments,

"Evil is considered as a possibility that is inherent in freedom: it would make no sense to call a creature free if it were not a priori possible for it to do evil. Secondly, the free choice of a personal agent, human or angelic, could not (for defenders of this solution) be determined in advance by God. It goes without saying that, if my choice is free, no-one, not even God,, has made a decision about it ahead of me. Lastly, since freedom is held as an extremely high, if not the highest, value, being essential to any relationship of love, it was good for God to 'take the risk' of creating free agents. God had to do so, if he wished to be loved, for that is not possible except where there is freedom."<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 19.

<sup>223</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 19.

<sup>224</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 20.

<sup>225</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 22.

<sup>226</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 37.

<sup>227</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 37. I wonder if there is a little truth in this. Not God's need for love but giving us the experience of freedom enables us to love others freely. I need to experience the choice to experience love.

The third approach treats evil and good as somehow in tension and necessary to each other. They are in effect two sides of the same coin. There is an element of dualism in the thought process. Blocher explains that:

“The thinkers in the third category probably differ among themselves even more than the advocates of the solutions we have already discussed. Using reason in a very free and speculative manner and enjoying the delights of paradox, they have two principal affirmations in common. First, they consider that evil has been present from the very origin of the world, as a qualified power which opposes Good. This evil is often called non-being or nothingness....but it is given actual reality, either in God or with God.”<sup>228</sup>

We also see as we look at these different approaches that attempts to explain evil either fulfil some form of purpose in God’s overall plan<sup>229</sup> - such as the manufacture of souls,<sup>230</sup> negate or lay down its place, extent or horror, treat good and evil as equals in tension and/or in conflict (dualism) or take a fatalistic approach to evil and suffering as an unavoidable aspect of existence.<sup>231</sup>

## Evaluation

### Listening

Now, I want to suggest, carefully, that each of the main accounts of evil have something to say to us. For example, those accounts that describe evil as negation are picking up on something vital as they consider its ontological nature. As a number of people throughout history have argued – including Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas and, in modern times, CS Lewis – evil is not a substance that God made; rather, evil is the negation of the good. Evil is parasitical on goodness.<sup>232</sup> That is to say that we want to put it in its right context: the bigger picture is of God’s infinite glory and beauty, the goodness of creation and the future joy of eternity.

This means that Augustine makes a helpful distinction between how God is sovereign over good and evil. God is sovereign over good as its creator. However, He is sovereign over evil as ruler. He acknowledges that God uses evil for good, but not as its originator because it is not a thing to create.<sup>233</sup>

Secondly, there is a sense in which the evil of suffering is formative. This is Paul’s point in Romans 5, the argument even of some secular psychiatrists and psychologists and the experience of many believers through history and around the world. One of the privileges of pastoral ministry is hearing the testimony of people who have grown in godliness and closer to God through suffering. To hear

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It’s not, though, that God needs my reciprocating love and so in a sense he can still predestine from the eternal angle. I also learn to trust.

<sup>228</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 65.

<sup>229</sup> See Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, 18 & 89-90.

<sup>230</sup> Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, 89.

<sup>231</sup> Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, 18.

<sup>232</sup> Augustine, *Answer to an enemy of the Law and the Prophets*, 1.5.7. Cited in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*, 246-7.

<sup>233</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 361.

someone who has suffered terribly through a long, debilitating, terminal illness say “God has been good to me” is truly humbling.

Thirdly, unless we are fatalists, then we do need to give an account for human freedom and this will have something to say about evil and its causes. A reformed understanding of God’s sovereignty and a strong denial of open theism does not exclude the place of free will. So, for example, John Calvin, along with Augustine of Hippo, is most closely associated with a theology that emphasises God’s sovereignty over and against human autonomy, but he says about Adam in his pre-fall existence:

“Therefore God has provided the soul of man with intellect, by which he might discern good from evil, just from unjust and might know what to follow or to shun, reason going before him with her lamp....to this he has joined will to which choice belongs.”<sup>234</sup>

The idea here is that true freedom is found in a will directed towards trust in the true and living God because Adam, before he sinned, was able to reason fully and so make wise choices. The will was “submissive to reason”.<sup>235</sup> Calvin allows for the real possibility that Adam and Eve could have withstood temptation, commenting that “Adam, therefore might have stood if he chose, since it was only by his free will that he fell.”<sup>236</sup> So when Calvin (and also Luther<sup>237</sup>) talk about human beings lacking free will, they are primarily talking about our state after sin and this lack of freedom is not so much about our finite state, but our fallen state. We are unable to make free choices because we are enslaved to our sinful desires so that Calvin has little time for “those who ...still seek for free will in man, notwithstanding of his being lost and drowned in spiritual destruction.”<sup>238</sup>

### Challenging

The problems we see with these attempts to explain evil is that they still fall a long way short both in giving an answer that satisfies our intellects and our emotions and in doing justice to the Biblical accounts as well.

So, whilst it is helpful to see evil as parasitic and to talk about it as negation, we cannot deny its painful reality. The cancer sufferer and the assault victim are very much aware of evil’s presence and horror. Furthermore, the Bible does not shy away from the reality and enormity of evil and suffering. As Blocher says, “Scripture never tires of denouncing the reality and the danger of evil; it is evil totally, radically and absolutely.”<sup>239</sup> This is seen both in God’s judgement on wickedness - “Nothing shows the evil reality of evil better than the wrath of God against it and the eternal perdition of those who choose evil and remain devoted to it”<sup>240</sup> – and in his solution, the Cross.

Secondly, if God truly is sovereign over the detail of everything,<sup>241</sup> then we cannot really get him off the hook by detaching him from the events. If God is constrained to permit by principles outside of

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<sup>234</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xv.8. (Beveridge, 1:169).

<sup>235</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xv.8. (Beveridge, 1:169).

<sup>236</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xv.8. (Beveridge, 1:169).

<sup>237</sup> C.f. Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*.

<sup>238</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xv.8. (Beveridge, 1:169).

<sup>239</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 85.

<sup>240</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 86.

<sup>241</sup> Blocher, *Evil and the Cross*, 90-91.



himself, then he is subject to a higher and impersonal authority; he is weak and not truly sovereign. If God permits out of choice, then that begs the question “why” just as much as if he directly authored it.<sup>242</sup>

### Putting a picture together

So, we have to admit that we don’t have a neat, tidy answer to the problem of evil and suffering. That, of course, is the reality of being humans. We are small, finite creatures in a massive Universe trying to understand an infinite God. This does not stop us from asking the questions or from continuing to look for answers though. Nor does the questioning and searching compete with the call to trust – and that may well be part of the point of it all, as we’ll consider very shortly. Before that, I want to make a few other suggestions for consideration.

First of all, we come back to the point that if God is sovereign, then everything which happens must in some way serve to fulfil his purpose and to glorify him. Secondly, that Scripture is clear that glory is not about “might is right”; worship is as much a response to goodness as it is to greatness and so we can expect these purposes to be for good. In fact, Scripture is clear is that God works all things together for our good, not just His. Thirdly, it is important as always to make careful distinctions. So, just as Augustine distinguishes God’s sovereignty as creator over good from his sovereignty as ruler over evil, so he and Calvin also make another vital distinction. This time, they distinguish between God’s intentions behind his decrees and human intentions in fulfilling them. Calvin, quoting Augustine, observes:

“Man sometimes with a good-will wishes something which God does not will, as when a good son wishes his father to live, while God wills him to die. Again, it may happen that man with a bad will wishes what God wills righteously as when a bad son wishes his father to die and God also wills it.”<sup>243</sup>

Examples of this include in the Old Testament where Joseph tells his brothers that they had intended to harm him by selling him as a slave, but this was actually fulfilling God’s plan for all their good. Then, in the New Testament (and I think Joseph’s experience is intended to point us forward to this image), we have evil men conspiring to kill Jesus. They do this to stop him, to destroy him, to further their own selfish ambitions, but God had planned the crucifixion before the start of time.

Now, this is where trust comes in. There is the sense in Scripture that present sufferings are incomparable to the joy waiting in eternity. Quite how that will come to be true, I don’t know. Christians have never expected to know all the answers here and now.<sup>244</sup> Nor can I pretend to fully understand the exact detailed nature of God’s overarching purpose or why this exact creation and history was the necessary way for God to do this.

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<sup>242</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xviii.1. (Beveridge, 1:198-199).

<sup>243</sup> Augustine, cited in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xviii (Beveridge, 1:203).

<sup>244</sup> The old hymn “I Cannot Tell” is a good example of this. The hymn states a number of propositions which the author is unable to fully comprehend or explain including why Jesus came and how he will put everything to right. However, running through it is the refrain “but this I know” where the author falls back on the clear revelation of Scripture and the experience of his testimony that God acts in loving kindness to heal and forgive.

I can come back to one or two suggestions or clues to what He might have in mind. First of all, some theologians suggest that the emphasis is on God's purpose to call to himself a people who are chosen by grace and learnt to love and enjoy grace. In that sense, it's not so much the Open Theism argument that we must be free so that we can freely choose to love God as that the story is set up so that he freely chooses to love us. You see, unconditional love means giving even when we don't deserve. I like this approach with its emphasis on grace.<sup>245</sup>

I also want to come back to the question of freedom at this point. I do think that even the Open Theists are onto something when they suggest that freedom is important as we learn to love. The problem with Open Theism is that it makes God the one who needs us to love him freely back. He becomes dependent on us, wanting our love. If God is love and God is Trinity, then he isn't dependent on us loving Him. His love for us is given freely; it is an act of grace. However, by giving me the experience of freedom, God gives me the opportunity to make choices so that I can genuinely experience what it means to love.

Finally, I think that The Doctrine of the Trinity gives us an important clue as to God's purposes. The Father eternally loves the Son and so wants to glorify him. It is through the history of Creation, Fall, Redemption and New Creation that the Son is glorified. Similarly, it is through this that the Son is able to love, obey and honour His father.

But I'm still living with incomplete answers. There are still questions. So, in the meantime, we keep asking, thinking, learning and trusting. How do I trust when the answer is incomplete? Well, to do that, I look back and see what God has done so far. Has God proved trustworthy? That's why we need to come back to the other part of our discussion. Does the God revealed in the Bible prove himself to be trustworthy, faithful, loving and good?

### **God, The Bible and Morality**

Does the God we find in the Bible prove himself to be trustworthy, faithful, good and loving? What about those parts of the Bible that actually appear to contradict morality? Isn't the Bible full of examples of genocide, sexual brutality, jealousy and vindictiveness? This is, after all, one of the arguments Richard Dawkins makes in *The God Delusion*.<sup>246</sup>

Dawkins offers a number of examples of dubious morality in the Bible, stating

“In Genesis with the well-loved story of Noah, derived from the Babylonian myth of Uta-Napisthim and known from the older mythologies of several cultures. The legend of the animals going into the ark two by two is charming, but the moral of the story of Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned

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<sup>245</sup> Though noting caution here. There's an ongoing if slightly obscure debate within reformed theology between Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism. The debate/discussion is about the logical order of things. Specifically, was it that God's first decree is to choose a people by grace and then the Fall followed logically from that or does the decree to choose /create a people by grace follow logically as a consequence of the Fall? Supralapsarians are those who want to emphasise God's plan to choose a people by grace. Infralapsarians recognise a healthy caution in trying to go back beyond the fall in our discussion of evil given that Scripture's focus on evil sticks to revealing how it came into the world and how God has responded since. See the discussion in John Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 336-339.

<sup>246</sup> He is not alone in this. Similar points are made by Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* and George Bernard Shaw, *Why I am not a Christian*.

the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless animals too).<sup>247</sup>

Then he is particularly taken with the events when the angels visit Sodom and Gomorrah to warn Lot and his family to flee and the interesting parallel with the Levite and his prostitute at the end of Judges. He also draws a comparison between Lot and his family being saved from the destruction of Sodom and Noah's salvation from the flood. He observes that:

"In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Noah equivalent, chosen to be spared with his family because he was uniquely righteous, was Abraham's nephew Lot. Two male angels were sent to Sodom to warn Lot to leave the city before the brimstone arrived. Lot hospitably welcomed the angels into his house, whereupon all the men of Sodom gathered around and demanded that Lot should hand the angels over so that they could (what else?) Sodomize them"<sup>248</sup>

In the Genesis account, Lot tries to reason with the men of the City and protect the angels:

"Lot's gallantry in refusing the demand suggests that God might have been onto something when he singled him out as the only good man in Sodom. But Lot's halo is tarnished by the terms of his refusal."<sup>249</sup>

You see, Lot's offer is for the men to have his daughters instead. He puts his own family at risk of gang rape. Dawkins notes though that:

"As it happened, Lot's bargaining away of his daughters' virginity proved unnecessary, for the angels succeeded in repelling the marauders striking them blind."<sup>250</sup> If Lot gives us a problem, then what about his uncle, the even more central Old Testament character, Abraham? Of him, Dawkins says,

"Lot's uncle Abraham was the founding father of all three 'great' monotheistic religions. His patriarchal status renders him only somewhat less likely than God to be taken as a role model. But what modern moralist would wish to follow him?"<sup>251</sup> A notable example of this is Abraham's attempt to pass his wife, Sarah, off as his sister to the Pharaoh in Egypt. He does this to protect his own life but he puts Sarah's life and honour at risk and brings judgement down on Egypt. If that's not bad enough, he later repeats the same mistake with Abimelech, the Philistine ruler.

Then there's the events surrounding the Exodus and the Law giving at Sinai. Whilst Moses is receiving the Law, the people of Israel get Aaron to provide them with golden images of calves to worship. They break the first two commandments. Dawkins describes the judgement that follows as

"God's monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god resembles nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind, and again it should strike a modern moralist as far from good role model material."<sup>252</sup>

Dawkins concludes that:

"To be fair much of the bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled together anthology of disjointed documents, composed,

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<sup>247</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 269.

<sup>248</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 271

<sup>249</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 272.

<sup>250</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 272.

<sup>251</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 274.

<sup>252</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 276.

revised translated, distorted and improved by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors, copyists, unknown to us and most unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.”<sup>253</sup>

So therefore, we cannot and should not use Scripture as the basis for our morality. In fact, Dawkins argues that even most believers don’t really use the Bible as the means by which they decide what is good and what is bad. So commenting on the incident where God tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice Isaac, Dawkins says

“But what kind of morals could one derive from this appalling story? Remember, all I’m trying to establish for the moment is that we do not, as a matter of fact, derive our morals from scripture. Or if we do, we pick and choose among the scriptures for the nice bits and reject the nasty.”<sup>254</sup> He sees evidence of Christians approaching the Bible in a pick and choose way when it comes to which parts of the Bible they choose to accept as literal. Going back to Noah’s flood, he observes:

“Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally any more. But this is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist’s decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation. If one of these is ‘morality flying by the seat of its pants’, so is the other.”<sup>255</sup> So how do we respond to this? I want to suggest three responses

#### **1. We need to distinguish between types of Biblical Genre**

Do some people pick and choose which parts of the Bible to accept as fact and which parts to obey? Yes, they do. Some Biblical scholars argue that much of the Bible is intended to be read as myth and story rather than as fact. This includes people who claim to be Christians as well as atheists. We particularly associate this approach with liberal theology. There are a number of reasons why they do this.

Sometimes, people pick and choose because they don’t like what the Bible seems to say. They find the idea morally repugnant or too close to the bone and too hard to obey in their own lives. There’s nothing new in this. One of Jesus’ criticisms of the Pharisees was

“Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel!”<sup>256</sup>

Paul has a similar criticism of those who pick and choose when and what to obey in Romans 2 and this criticism reflects something of the complaint raised by the prophets against Israel.

Sometimes, such an approach comes from the assumption that stories about miracles are too incredible to be true. In other words, they start with the presupposition that God does not intervene supernaturally.

Sometimes, the discussion about whether or not to treat a Bible event as fact or fiction arises from disagreement over the evidence. Is the claim supported by the current scientific consensus? Are we happy that the archaeological evidence presented supports the claim? The challenge here is not the absence of evidence, but, as we have discussed before, when evidence is presented, there is usually some debate and discussion about its validity and meaning. Now, we have a problem here because we like instant answers. We want the evidence to serve our apologetic purposes. Historians and

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<sup>253</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 268

<sup>254</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 275

<sup>255</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 269.

<sup>256</sup> Matthew 23:24. New Living Translation.

scientists tend to appreciate that it takes time to analyse and evaluate. They also know that competing explanations can take it in turns over time to hold the upper hand.

For example, take the Exodus from Egypt and invasion of the Promised Land described in Joshua and Judges. Is there evidence for an invasion of Israel and the destruction of cities like Jericho? The simple answer is that yes, there is substantial evidence of those great cities being destroyed that fits with the descriptions in the Bible. The challenge is that, over the years, different archaeologists have visited the sites, carried out their own excavations and done experiments such as carbon dating to try and date the events. Guess what? Some of the results have suggested dates that fit with the consensus for when the Exodus would have taken place; others have dated the destruction of Jericho and other sites to a couple of centuries earlier.<sup>257</sup> So what do you do when that happens? Well, I would counsel patience. See how the argument develops over time. You also look for the most natural and reasonable explanation for the data. So, for example, if the archaeological evidence matches what happened in the Bible better than any other historical explanation, then either we've estimated the date of the Exodus wrong or our carbon dating results are inaccurate.

I would like to suggest three responses to these reasons for picking and choosing.

First of all, I happen to agree to some extent with Dawkins. Saying that something is just an allegorical myth does not really help if the allegory appears to support an unethical way of behaving or thinking. For example, it doesn't matter if the Flood didn't really happen if the story told presents a picture of a God who is vindictive and destructive because first of all, we will learn to fear Him rather than to love him and secondly, we will learn to behave like him. We will justify our own vindictive and destructive behaviour.

Secondly, just because something is incredible or hard to believe, it does not mean that it doesn't happen. Sometimes a team like Leicester City wins the Premier League, humbling Manchester City and Chelsea in the process. Sometimes the "joke candidate" becomes a party leader or a presidential candidate.

Thirdly, just because some people make those arbitrary and subjective choices, it does not negate the point that there is a right distinction to make between the different Biblical genres. The Bible is intentionally a mixture of different genres including historical narratives, poetry, wise sayings, apocalyptic literature and some stories that are meant to be read as fiction. This also means that within the different types of literature, we'll see rhetorical devices used; we'll see irony, satire and hyperbole at work. We'll realise that a story can be told in a number of different ways depending upon the author's intention. A Bible passage may be intended to argue a case, give supporting evidence, encourage, act as a cautionary tale and even to mock or lampoon.

A genuine and sensitive engagement with the genre and style of writing will help us to understand the message the author is communicating. You see, the author may not always be intending us to treat the characters involved and the events that happen as examples to follow.

## **2. It's important to identify the author's intended application**

At this stage, we need to deal with a rather mischievous red herring that Richard Dawkins has thrown into the pot. You see, by mixing in those stories that he finds unpleasant and weird, Dawkins blurs the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive literature.

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<sup>257</sup> See for example Bryant Wood, *Dating Jericho's Destruction* (<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2012/03/28/Dating-Jerichos-Destruction-Bienkowski-is-Wrong-on-All-C>, accessed 11/05/2016) and also, Bryant Wood, *Carbon 14 Dating at Jericho* (<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/08/Carbon-14-Dating-at-Jericho.aspx>, accessed 11/05/2016).

In other words, just because we read that Abraham, Lot, Moses or David did something, it doesn't mean that the Bible endorses their actions. This seems reasonably obvious, but the purpose of retelling a story may be to caution against those behaviours or to give an insight into the human character. Now, if some of those stories are hideously awful and involve deceit, torture, rape, murder and genocide, then they accurately reflect the world we see around us. In our own lifetimes, we have seen such things repeated in Bosnia, Rwanda and Syria. The Bible does not shrink back from describing the full horror of evil.

The Biblical account shows that even those who are marked out as righteous fail and fall. Noah is exposed and shamed in his drunkenness. Abraham lies and puts his wife at risk; this is also a failure of faith because he tries to solve things himself rather than trusting the God who made promises to him.

So we learn two lessons from the lives of Noah, Abraham and Lot. First of all, existential ethics don't work. I cannot assume that what I subjectively identify as good, even if I am widely considered to be a good person, will be good.

Secondly, Paul tells us that Abraham is counted righteous through faith not by works. It's not about him being the perfect example and getting everything right. God chooses Abraham and loves him in exactly the same way he chooses and loves you and me: by grace.

Furthermore, by highlighting the full horror and extent of evil, the Bible points to why there is judgement. We've been talking about God being in the dock and that suggests that we'll be looking for him to provide evidence of his goodness when he speaks but the Bible shows that there is another case being heard. It's not just God who is put in the dock. We seek to put God on trial but the Bible Says that it is you and me in the dock. We are the ones who have rebelled against God. We are the ones who have exploited creation through greed. We are the ones who have been cruel and destructive towards others. The Bible's account of human history puts a mirror up to us so that we can see what we are really like.

So, sometimes the author intends to give us a command to obey, or a promise to trust, but not always. Sometimes, the author intends to give us an insight into the depth and depravity of the human condition.

Sometimes, we look at the event and see something so wonderful and amazing that we are not meant to try and imitate it. We are meant to realise that we cannot do these things ourselves. Take, for example, David killing Goliath. We are not meant to take this primarily as an example of how we should face our own giants. We are not meant to place ourselves in David's shoes. Instead, we are meant to find ourselves looking on with the Israelite army in wide eyed wonder as God sends His chosen deliverer.

Sometimes, we are meant to find wise principles and general truths to wrestle with as we seek to apply them to our own situations. That's how the Proverbs work. They are not predictions or promises. They are general truths that apply differently to each context.

### **3. We need to read Scripture in the context of God's overarching Salvation narrative**

This is particularly important when we get to those Bible passages where we find God acting in ways that we find difficult to stomach, such as sending a flood to cover the earth, punishing idolatry with death or ordering the destruction of the Canaanites.

So, we come back to the overarching Bible narrative which we can sum up as follows.

God is eternal. He is love, just, sovereign, wise. He is the Triune God who is self-existent. God is not dependent upon anything outside of Himself.

God freely chose to create this World because He is good; His creation was good, beautiful and ordered. Because He is love, He made us to have a relationship with Him and each other. God put boundaries in place to teach us to love, trust and depend on Him. God said that the penalty and consequence of breaking those boundaries would be death.

The first humans chose to rebel against God because they wanted to be equal to Him. They did not trust Him. They believed a lie about Him. So death entered the World.

God has acted to save a people for Himself. Where we deserve the penalty of death, the Son has died in our place, defeating death.

One day, the Son will return as Judge, raising those He died and rose for to eternal life. However, judgement means that there will be a consequence for those who did not put their trust in the Son, who rejected Him and continued in rebellion against God. The death penalty will still stand. This means eternal separation from God's loving presence. The Bible calls this hell.<sup>258</sup>

So when we come to events like the Flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, what do we see? I want to suggest that we see in miniature little examples of the big picture. Sin brings death, destruction and sadness. Judgement is coming. However, the God who by nature is love is the God who delights to rescue. God is Saviour. God saves Noah from the Flood and Lot from Sodom. God provides a substitute in place of Isaac.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of evil does not allow for easy answers. Nor does the Bible ever offer us the simple answer "this is where evil came from." However, what the Bible does is three vital things.

First of all, it refuses to accept and live with evil. There's no place for appeasement and accommodation between light and darkness. The fact that God is sovereign and uses evil circumstances for our good and His glory is never used to justify, excuse or minimise the horror of those events and actions. Creation was designed as a place where evil and sin were absent. New Creation is pictured as a place where evil and suffering are banished from forever.

Secondly, it tells us that God has done something about evil. God identifies as the one who delivers and protects His people. God is the one who, in Jesus, steps into history and suffers the consequence and penalty of sin in our place.

Thirdly, the Bible offers us hope. It tells us to look forward to that day when suffering and sorrow will cease. We can face present suffering because that day is coming.

This brings us back to the original question. You may recall that we started out by stating that the God revealed in Scripture is a good and great God. By goodness, we mean his love, wisdom and holiness; by greatness, we mean his sovereignty over time and space (He is eternal and infinite) and over all of his creation.

We said that atheism is a challenge to God's greatness and goodness. It rejects God's greatness by insisting that there is no evidence for God's existence. It rejects God's goodness by claiming that the

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<sup>258</sup> This means that a full engagement with the problem of evil and the question of God's goodness does require us to think through what we believe about judgement and Hell. We will cover this when we look at New Creation.

God revealed in Scripture is not morally good. In other words, atheism says that God does not exist and, if He did exist, then if he were anything like the God of the Bible, He would not be worthy of our praise and affection.

The Bible's argument is that God has shown His existence, His infinite glory, beauty and majesty in Creation and in His acts through history. The Bible tells us that God's goodness is seen in the Gospel in Jesus taking our place and dying on the Cross for our sin. God's goodness and greatness are seen together in the resurrection of Jesus and one day will be seen most fully when He comes to reign.



## **21 God's Goodness and Greatness – Practical Application for Life**

Over the past few months, we've spent a lot of time exploring God's character. We've talked about God's goodness – that he is wise, holy, just and love. We've also seen his greatness as we've described his sovereignty in terms of his eternal, all knowing, unconquerable, unchanging nature

The discussion may have felt a little academic and technical at times as we've laid the groundwork of what we believe about who God is. However, on this site, we keep coming back to the point that what we believe affects how we live. We've said that we can choose either to believe truth or lies about God.

That's why the two specific examples we looked at apologetically are important. Most of our readers are probably not atheists by conviction or signed up to an obscure theological theory like Open Theism.

However, it is very easy to become practical atheists and practical open theists by living a life that suggests that God is not great and God is not good. We do this when we push God to the boundaries and margins of our lives and society. We do this when we fail to exercise faith in God's goodness and do not trust him to act and answer prayer. We do this when we fail to give him the worship and honour he deserves.

If God is good and great, it will affect:

1. Worship – how do we approach this? (thinking both about worship as how we live the whole of our lives and corporate worship as we gather to sing praise, pray and read Scripture together.)
2. Prayer life – is this a constant and natural part of my life reflecting true intimacy with God?
3. Guidance – how do I go about making decisions? Does this betray a secular or superstitious approach?
4. Pastoral care – how do I approach big questions like suffering?
5. Apologetics & evangelism – how and why do I bother to share my faith with others?

Let's start to have a look at a few of these.

## 22 God's Goodness and Greatness – implications for worship

Our first response to God's goodness and greatness is worship. In fact, Calvin says that our first priority in life is to seek to be worshippers:

"We should consider it the great end of our existence to be found numbered among the worshippers of God."<sup>259</sup>

We exist in a Christian culture where worship is often controversial as believers fall out and churches split over style and traditions. We also live in a Christian culture where at times it sadly seems that worship has become big business. We live in the day and age of the celebrity worship leader. However, as Bob Kauflin says:

"Whether you see the 'worship phenomenon' as a good thing, a bad thing, or something in between, this much is certain; the worship of God matters. It's never irrelevant. It's never unimportant. The worship of God should always be a hot topic. And from God's perspective, it is. There is nothing more foundational to our relationship with God and to our lives as Christians."<sup>260</sup>

### 1. Worship is...

What exactly does it mean to worship? What is worship? We often use the word to describe what we do when we gather as believers, especially the sung and/or liturgical part of a meeting.

However, worship is broader than that. It's both about what we do together corporately when we gather and about what we do as we scatter into the world during the week. Worship is about living the whole of life for God.<sup>261</sup>

It involves giving homage and adoration. David Peterson says

"The words most commonly translated 'worship' in Scripture convey the notion of homage or grateful submission to God. In general use, these terms expressed the oriental custom of bowing down or casting oneself on the ground, kissing the feet, the hem of a garment or the ground as a gesture of respect to someone (e.g. Gen 18:2; Exod 18:7; 2 Sam 14:4)."<sup>262</sup>

Worship is about glorifying God. Bob Kauflin takes us to Psalm 145:3 which says

"Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise!  
No one can measure his greatness."

In this Psalm,

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<sup>259</sup> John Calvin cited in Kauflin, *True worshippers*, 21

<sup>260</sup> Bob Kauflin, *True Worshippers. Seeking what matters to God* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2015), 21.

<sup>261</sup> Peterson, *Encountering God Together*, 37.

<sup>262</sup> David G Peterson, *Encountering God Together*. Biblical patterns for ministry and worship (Nottingham. IVP, 2013), 28-29.

“David shows the appropriate starting point for worship. It involves thinking about, magnifying, and responding to the glory and splendour of God.”<sup>263</sup>

This helps us to think about the role of worship leaders in the church. As Kauflin comments,

“Many of those we lead on Sunday morning are eager to join us and have been magnifying God’s unsearchable greatness all week. Others are distracted. It could be anything from the superficial to the serious – deadlines, unpaid bills, a friend’s unkind comment, a lab test for cancer, the thump-thump noise the car is making, a rebellious child, some besetting sin. Or a million other details of life. What size does God appear to be when our mind is preoccupied with all the cares, worries, and concerns of life? Very small. But God is not small. He is great. Magnifying and cherishing his greatness is at the heart of biblical worship.”<sup>264</sup>

This means that those of us who are preparing to lead worship each week will want to think carefully about how we help those coming who are distracted, overwhelmed or see God as small. This might include taking time to acknowledge those challenges, circumstances and fears at the start of the meeting. We do not come to worship with a sense of escapism to run away from those things or pretend that they are not real. However, we should gain a new perspective on them as we gather. Those things are in fact small and God is big, not the other way around. Prayers, Bible readings and songs that declare God’s greatness, sovereignty, beauty and invincibility can help to re-calibrate the heart.

Not that our focus should solely be on the corporate gathering. It’s not just on Sunday as we sing and pray that we want to see God as big. We all have a responsibility to each other throughout the week to help one another to be true worshippers. The encouraging text, phone call or visit can make the difference. Shaping and seasoning conversations with gospel truth can pull another believer out of the despair that grumbling and gossiping cause. The worship service itself can be a place where we regroup and reorientate for the week ahead. The songs we sing, the tone and content of the talk can all convey a sense of God’s goodness and greatness that will help people to keep seeing God as big throughout the week.

## **2. How do we worship God?**

Or alternatively, we could say “How do we glorify God?” John Piper takes us to the Westminster Confession faith, Shorter Catechism.

“You might turn the world on its head by changing one word in your creed. The old tradition says;

‘The chief end of man is to glorify God  
AND  
Enjoy him forever’

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<sup>263</sup> Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters*. Leading others to encounter the Greatness of God (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 61.

<sup>264</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 61.

‘And?’ Like ham and eggs? Sometimes you glorify God and sometimes you enjoy him? Sometimes he gets glory and sometimes you get joy? ‘And’ is a very ambiguous word! Just how do these two things relate to each other?

Evidently, the old theologians didn’t think they were talking about two things. They said ‘chief end,’ not ‘chief ends.’ Glorifying God and enjoying him were one end in their minds.”<sup>265</sup>

And so Piper suggests a small alteration to the question in the catechism.

“The chief end of man is to glorify God

BY

Enjoying him forever.”<sup>266</sup>

The correct response to God’s greatness is to be overwhelmed and overawed. His greatness is not just about ‘might’ to be feared and dreaded but is also about overwhelming beauty. His greatness and sovereignty point to infinite love, order, wisdom, purity.

This means that, when we worship,

“We aren’t simply reciting facts about God, like students reviewing their multiplication tables. God wants us to delight in him (Psalm 37:4). He is exalted when all energies are directed to one end – being satisfied in who he is.”<sup>267</sup>

It means that we worship him with our happiness, our contentedness, our pleasure. Piper goes on to say that:

“When I was in college I had a vague pervasive notion that if I did something good because it would make me happy, I would ruin its goodness.”<sup>268</sup>

However, he came to realise that:

“Praising God, the highest calling of humanity and our eternal vocation did not involve the renunciation but rather the consummation of the joy I so desired. My old effort to achieve worship with no self interest in it proved to be a contradiction in terms. Worship is basically adoration and we adore only what delights us. There is no such thing as sad adoration or unhappy praise.”<sup>269</sup>

This was a revolutionary, life changing discovery for him. As he comments,

“We have a name for those who try to praise when they have no pleasure in the object. We call them hypocrites. This fact – that praise means consummate pleasure and that the

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<sup>265</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God* (Leicester. IVP, 1996), 13.

<sup>266</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 14.

<sup>267</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 65.

<sup>268</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 14.

<sup>269</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 15.

highest end of man is to drink deeply of this pleasure – was perhaps the most liberating discovery I ever made.”<sup>270</sup>

The worshipper is a happy person. Piper calls him a “Christian hedonist” finding his pleasure in God.

The worshipper is an artist. They are someone who in some way captures and reflects something of the awe, beauty, greatness and vastness of the eternal God in the moment of worship.

The worshipper is a receiver.<sup>271</sup> They are acting in response to God’s goodness. Worship is a response to God’s goodness; a recognition of his love, mercy and grace. Kauflin illustrates this with the story of a friend.

“I have a good friend named Craig who years ago attended seminary, carrying a heavy class load and serving in an unpaid internship. Being a typical seminary student, he was dirt poor.

Craig kept in touch with a college buddy who’d landed a job that actually paid good money. Every so often, the two of them enjoyed a meal at a local restaurant. Despite Craig’s genuine protests, the friend would always foot the bill. Finally, Craig took a stand. ‘Please let me pay!’ he insisted.

His friend was unmoved. ‘Craig, why is it so hard for you to receive? You can’t even be a Christian if you can’t receive!’

Craig’s friend was right. Our first responsibility as Christians is not to give to God but to receive from him.”<sup>272</sup>

Kauflin concludes:

“The ability and desire to worship God is something that God himself gives us. But there is another aspect to that gift. In the process of drawing and enabling us, God reveals himself to us. He tells us who he is. Not only are we unable to worship God apart from his grace, we don’t even know who it is we’re worshipping. God has to tell us. And he’s done that in the Bible.”<sup>273</sup>

Enjoying God will mean

- A genuine sense of celebration in corporate worship – joyful singing, reading Scripture, prayers of thanksgiving.
- Enabling people to use gifts and talents – as noted above, worship has an artistic dimension - a place for dance, instruments etc. I don’t agree with a minimalist view of these things: that instruments are just there to support singing. Corporate worship will give a right place for the range of emotions silent space and gentle music to reflect alongside the noise and rhythm of celebration and declaration. There should be space for crying as we are moved by our own sin and the state of the lost; space for smiles, laughter and cheers as we rejoice at God’s goodness and share in his triumph over sin and death.

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<sup>270</sup> Piper, *Desiring God*, 15.

<sup>271</sup> Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 31.

<sup>272</sup> Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 31.

<sup>273</sup> Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 39.

- Every day service. Worship is both what we do together corporately at formal gatherings and what we do as we scatter into the world.

That's right: worship, even though it's about enjoying God's greatness and goodness, even though it's all about receiving God's grace, is still about service.

In the Old Testament, we see that,

"The purpose of Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt was to serve the Lord (e.g. Exod 3:12; 4:23; 8:1)." <sup>274</sup>

In the New Testament, we are reminded that we too were saved by grace for works of service. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

This service is not about how we earn God's love. It's not even about mere duty or gratitude. Rather, it is,

- a. Part of the artistry described above – working in God's creation, stewarding it, looking after it for our mutual enjoyment
- b. A means of demonstrating God's love and so magnifying his goodness
- c. The way we show obedience and loyalty to God

"Israel's service is related to fearing God, waling in all his ways and observing all his commands and decrees. A total lifestyle of allegiance was clearly required of God's people (e.g. Deut 10:12-13; Josh 22:5; 24:14-24)." <sup>275</sup>

- d. Service is an expression of hope in future grace

### **3. The difference that knowing God's character makes to our worship (or why doctrine matters experientially)**

We can only worship God truthfully because and when he reveals himself to us. However, that does not mean that when we don't know God then we are not worshipping him. "We're always worshipping something, someone." <sup>276</sup> Or as someone else puts it,

"We never begin worship, we aim it." <sup>277</sup>

In other words, worship is something we do naturally, but we are either worshipping the true God or idols. This can be about worshipping a false image of God. This happens when we glorify in things that are not good or not great: when we believe lies or half truths about him. We also end up worshipping other alternatives: false gods. Often we end up worshipping ourselves – and the works of our own hands. This is the danger of pride. Honestly and helpfully, Kauflin talks about how being involved in leading a church, he grew proud. God intervened. It was a painful breakdown.

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<sup>274</sup> Peterson, *Encountering God Together*, 33.

<sup>275</sup> Peterson, *Encountering God Together*, 34.

<sup>276</sup> Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 51.

<sup>277</sup> Matt Papa. Cited in Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 51.

“It wasn’t a lack of worship that caused my breakdown. It was worship in the wrong direction. Worship in the wrong direction is called idolatry. It’s looking to anything other than God for our ultimate satisfaction, comfort, security, or joy.”<sup>278</sup>

Finally, we can end up with a wrong understanding of what true worship is if we don’t truly know who God is. Kaulfin says:

“If our songs aren’t specific about God’s nature, character, and acts we’ll tend to associate worship with a style of music, a heightened emotional state, a type of architecture, a day of the week. A meeting, a reverent mood, a time of singing, or a sound.”<sup>279</sup>

Therefore, there are some important implications that arise out of our doctrine including:

- We will see and value the importance of accurate, explicit description of God in our songs, prayers and teaching.<sup>280</sup>
- Spiritual reformation and revitalisation in a church will be seen in corporate worship and life worship including the words used, attitudes, actions etc. We will hold each other accountable – recognising that pride is dangerous because it leads to idolatry
- We will think carefully, lovingly and wisely about the implications of this for non-believers participating in corporate worship.<sup>281</sup>

## Conclusion

The first and most important application of all our Bible teaching, preaching and studying should be worship. The nature of our worship will be a sure sign as to whether or not we are believing truth or lies about God and his character.

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<sup>278</sup> Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, 50.

<sup>279</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 62.

<sup>280</sup> Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 62.

<sup>281</sup> This opens up questions about seeker friendly services and whether or not we should expect non-Christians to take part in corporate worship through singing, praying etc. This is probably worth a whole discussion in its own right.

## 23 God's Goodness and Greatness – Implications for Prayer

Another response to God's character should be a lively prayer life. In fact, this is part of worship. Prayer is an obvious response to God's goodness. God is love and so prayer is about a relationship with him, knowing God and knowing that he loves to hear us. We can be confident that a good and loving God will answer.

### Prayer as the Right Response to God's Goodness and Greatness

Prayer is the right response to a wise God. We want to learn from him. He is the source of all knowledge and wisdom. He is the only one we can turn to for trustworthy advice. We are right to seek his guidance.

Prayer is right because if God is sovereign, then he is the only true source of goodness, love and wisdom. He is the only one who can work in our lives, so we need to go to Him.

Prayer reminds me that I am not on my own. Secularism says "we are on our own. It's just the human race left to sort things out by itself." Prayer says that this is a lie.

When I pray before I prepare a sermon, I remind myself that this isn't just an intellectual exercise and when I pray before I preach, I'm saying that I'm not just going to share my own thoughts in a sort of lecture. Instead, when I preach, I want to share God's Word. I want people to have an encounter with the Gospel. So I pray.

When the church leadership team meets, secularism says that it's just a committee, a group of men and women making the best decision we can. When we pray, we say "No, this is more than that. We are meeting believing that the Holy Spirit is present. God will guide us so that His will is done."

### A Problem for Prayer

However, it seems that God's sovereignty poses a problem for prayer. We say that prayer changes things, but does it? We tell people to pray and trust God to answer and act, but will he respond to our requests?

Carson presents the dilemma this way.

"If prayer changes things, how can we believe that God is sovereign and all knowing? How can we hold that he has his plans all worked out and that these plans cannot fail?"<sup>282</sup>

Yet, when we come to the Bible, we find the great heroes of faith talking with God on the basis that they do expect prayer to change things.

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<sup>282</sup> DA Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Nottingham. IVP Baker Books, 1992), 145.



This means that “Those who pray in the Scriptures regularly pray in line with what God has already disclosed he is going to do.”<sup>283</sup> So, for example, Daniel, when he is reminded of God’s promises and purposes, exactly because He believes that God is sovereign and will accomplish his plan, prays.<sup>284</sup>

Equally, we find Abraham pleading with God to relent from the destruction of Sodom. Similarly, Moses, when faced with God announcing his intention to wipe out the idolatrous people at Sinai, does not fatalistically accept it but instead, pleads with God for mercy.<sup>285</sup>

Abraham, Moses and Daniel seem to act on the basis that prayer does have an effect: that it really does change things. Daniel is working on the basis that although God intends to do something and has said that he will do it, the action in some way seems to be contingent upon Daniel responding in prayer and exercising faith in God’s covenant promises. Abraham and Moses work on the basis that God’s declaration of intent is an invitation for them to intercede and that God will respond favourably to his intercession.

So how does prayer to a sovereign God who is both good and great work? Well, if we really want to know that, then what better place to go to than Jesus’ teaching on prayer?

### **What does Jesus say about prayer?**

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that on one occasion Jesus took his followers up into the Hill country and spent time teaching and training them about the nature of God’s kingdom, what it means to be a disciple, his radical interpretation and application of the Law and the secret of true contentment. This training session has become known as The Sermon on the Mount and during it Jesus says,

<sup>7</sup> “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. <sup>8</sup> Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! <sup>9</sup> Pray like this:

Our Father in heaven,  
may your name be kept holy.  
<sup>10</sup> May your Kingdom come soon.  
May your will be done on earth,  
as it is in heaven.  
<sup>11</sup> Give us today the food we need,  
<sup>12</sup> and forgive us our sins,  
as we have forgiven those who sin against us.  
<sup>13</sup> And don’t let us yield to temptation,  
but rescue us from the evil one.”<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 162.

<sup>284</sup> See Daniel 9. See also Ephesians 1:17-19 for a New Testament example of prayer in response to a sovereign god. See Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 172.

<sup>285</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 163.

<sup>286</sup> Matthew 6: 7-13.

Jesus starts by telling us how to pray. He says “take a look at the pagans around you who don’t know the true and living God. How do they pray?” Answer, “with lots of noise and repetition.” And Jesus says “Well you don’t need to be like that.” RT France explains,

“The term for ‘Gentiles’ is the same as that used in [Matthew] 5:47 ...to denote the world outside the disciple community. The emphasis here is not so much on their not being Jewish as on there being religious outsiders, people who do not understand what it means to know god as a heavenly Father. So instead of trusting a Father to fulfil their needs, they think they must badger a reluctant Deity into taking notice of them (c.f. the expressive modern term ‘God botherer’)... It is not necessarily purely mechanical, but rather obtrusive and unnecessary. It assumes that the purpose of prayer is first to demand God’s attention and then inform him of needs he may have overlooked.”<sup>287</sup>

In other words, we end up with just as unhealthy an attitude to prayer when we fail to recognise God’s sovereignty.

“If God is not absolutely sovereign... maybe the reason he does not answer your prayers as you would like is that he can’t. Suppose you are praying for the conversion of your sister. If God has already done everything he can to bring her to himself, but somehow she won’t give in, why bother asking him to save her? Isn’t it a little indecent to pressure God to do more when he has already done the best he can?”<sup>288</sup>

This is the argument with which Elijah taunts the prophets of Baal at Carmel. Their god, Baal, is weak, limited by time and space and so they cannot be sure that he has heard them he is able to act. Or if he is able to act then:

“one might reason that God is powerful, but somehow aloof, unwilling to do very much until we ask him. Then, of course, he grants some requests but turns down others simply because he can’t do any better.”<sup>289</sup>

So Jesus insists that God is both willing and able to act. He’s not deaf nor ignorant of our needs nor aloof to our desires. Rather, he is fully aware. In fact, because he is the eternal God who knows everything, he already knows before we ask.

So, when I pray, I can approach God with confidence, knowing that He and He alone is the one who is able and willing to answer. As Calvin comments:

“But after we have learned by faith to know that whatever is necessary for us or defective in us is supplied in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom it hath pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell, that we may thence draw us from an inexhaustible fountain, it remains for us to seek an in prayer implore of him what we have learned to be in him.”<sup>290</sup>

Prayer, then, is the place where we learn to exercise and declare our trust in God. Prayer is a statement of faith in God’s ability and desire to provide all that we need. Mind you, that might still

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<sup>287</sup> RT France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids MI.: Eerdmans, 2007), 240.

<sup>288</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 146.

<sup>289</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 146.

<sup>290</sup> Calvin *Institutes*, III.XX.1 (Beveridge, 2:146).

beg the question “why bother praying if God already knows what I need and already intends to act?” Calvin anticipates such an objection and responds as follows:

“But some will say, ‘Does he not know without a monitor both what our difficulties are, and what is meet for our interest, so that it seems in some measure superfluous to solicit him by our prayers, as if he were winking or even sleeping until awakened by the sound of our voice?’ Those who argue thus attend not to the end for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not so much for his sake as for ours.”<sup>291</sup>

The important line there is “It was not so much for his sake as for ours.”<sup>292</sup> The reason I should pray is not that if I don’t then God will not act, but rather that as I pray, I declare my trust in God and I learn to trust Him more.

Now on one level it looks like Calvin is saying that prayer doesn’t really change things, it changes me. That’s one way of dealing with the problem of prayer, sovereignty and change. So some people

“argue that the only change prayer affects is within the person praying. Because I pray for certain things (they hold), I focus on them and strive for them, and I myself am changed.”<sup>293</sup>

The Christian learns to obey and this leads to a change in his heart or will. He learns to accept and to align with God’s plan. Even an atheist can accept this notion of prayer having a form of psychological effect.<sup>294</sup> There is something in this. For example, when Abraham pleads with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, he does not save the cities from destruction, but God uses the conversation to reveal his will and his plan to Abraham. Abraham learns that God will do what is just and right by rescuing Lot from the City whilst still exercising justice against its wicked inhabitants.

But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there? To be sure, Sodom and Gomorrah are still destroyed in that instance, but that’s not the only example of intercession. Let’s look at two more.

1. At Sinai, God threatens to wipe out the Israelites. Moses intercedes and there is a change. God does not wipe the people out in the Wilderness.
2. Jonah prophesies that God will destroy the City of Nineveh. The people repent in sack cloth and ashes. God relents from his judgement. The city is saved.

We can surely safely assume that had Moses not interceded then Israel would have been wiped out and if the people of Nineveh had continued in their sin and not turned to God, they too would have been destroyed. Prayer changes things.

So what is going on? I would suggest that we can helpfully think of prayer and God’s sovereignty in two ways.

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<sup>291</sup> Calvin *Institutes*, III.XX.3 (Beveridge, 2:147).

<sup>292</sup> Calvin *Institutes*, III.XX.3 (Beveridge, 2:147).

<sup>293</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 146.

<sup>294</sup> Carson, *Spiritual Reformation*, 147.

First of all, we can think of prayer as God saying to us, “Come and walk with me. I want to talk with you and show you what I’m going to do.” He allows us into a conversation. He draws us into his sovereign plan.<sup>295</sup>

Secondly, we can see prayer as one of the many ways that God chooses to fulfil his sovereign plan through human actions. For example, in the Bible:

- God uses Assyria and Babylon to fulfil his plan to judge rebellious Israel
- God used the prophet Jonah to call the people of Nineveh to repentance so he could demonstrate his mercy and compassion
- God used the Pharisees to hand Jesus over to Pilate to be crucified

In each case, God used human agencies to accomplish his will. They had the responsibility to act in line with God’s plan. In that sense, the end goal was contingent upon their actions. Their actions “changed things.” However, God was still sovereign; his plan was still going to be accomplished.

Today, God uses every day witness, pastors, preachers, church planters and evangelists to proclaim the good news. If they choose not to go and tell, then people will not hear. And yet, God is still sovereign and his Gospel is and will be proclaimed.

Prayer fits in with that. God chooses that the process by which he will accomplish his plans is that he will move us to pray and to ask him to act. He does things this way so that we learn to depend on him. We realise that we don’t accomplish things by human might and power. Instead, it is God who changes things, God who heals, God who provides, God who saves.

So, in summary

- We pray because we know that God wants us to pray. He has chosen to act through our prayers.
- We pray with confidence knowing that God knows our needs even before we ask.
- We pray with confidence knowing that God is both willing (good) and able (great) to answer our prayers and provide what we need for his glory.

### **Prayer – a little bit more than that**

So, we pray because there is a real sense in which prayer works. Prayer does change things. We pray because as we see God at work changing things in response to our prayers, we change too. We learn to trust him more, we learn to love him more and we learn to obey him more.

However, I’m not completely satisfied by this yet. We’re still focusing on prayer being about asking and interceding. A big part of prayer is just that. In the Lord’s Prayer we ask for

- God’s name to be honoured – made holy
- God’s will to be done
- God to provide our daily needs
- Forgiveness from sin
- Protection and deliverance from evil

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<sup>295</sup> Recognising here the constraints of talking analogously about God. The eternal God is timeless and so his will isn’t subject to the process of chronological time.

- Guidance

Yet, even if all of those things weren't there, then prayer would still matter. Why? Well, simply because prayer is about more than asking. Prayer is about a relationship.

I have a relationship with my wife and so I communicate with her. Of course, sometimes I ask her things. I ask her for information: "What's happening today?" I ask her to do things: "Could you pick up some milk on the way home?" I ask her for things, e.g. when she asks me what I'd like for my birthday.

But asking is not the sole purpose of communication and conversation. I also smile at her, tell her I love her, laugh at her jokes, tell her jokes, praise her beauty and achievements, express sadness, comfort her and receive comfort, say thank you and say sorry.

Yes, prayer changes me, yes prayer changes things, but prayer also changes or grows my relationship with God. Prayer enables me to draw closer to him, to love him more, to know him better as I gain insight into his will and purpose. In other words, I pray because "God is love." In prayer, I experience that love and respond back to God with love for him. In intercession, I express the truth that because God has first loved me, I also love others.

Prayer gives us a foretaste now of the deeper communion we will experience with Him in eternity. There will be day when we won't need to ask him to change things, no suffering to grieve over, no coming wrath to plead about. And yet, the conversation will go on.

## 24 God's Goodness and Greatness: Implications for Spiritual Warfare

If God is completely sovereign and knows all things, past present and future, then is spiritual warfare real?

Or to put it the other way round, given that the Bible talks about spiritual warfare and given our experience in life of an ongoing struggle between good and evil, doesn't this challenge our understanding of God's complete and detailed sovereignty over everything?

### What is Spiritual Warfare?

I want to suggest that there are three aspects to Spiritual Warfare.

First of all, we talk about Christ's Victory at Calvary as spiritual war. It was at the Cross that God defeated the enemy, the powers of evil. It was when Jesus died that Satan lost. Paul says

"<sup>13</sup>You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.<sup>14</sup> He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>In this way, he disarmed<sup>[d]</sup> the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross."<sup>296</sup>

You will see here that God's victory is described in terms of the cancellation of charges. God won when Jesus took the penalty of sin upon himself. This is how Satan and his demonic forces were defeated. You see, their primary weapon is the ability to accuse us and shame us. That power was taken away from them when Jesus took the penalty for our sin.

Secondly, spiritual warfare includes the engagement of spiritual beings against each other. John Frame says:

"Angels participate in kingdom warfare. Above and around us are good and evil angels, engaged in spiritual warfare. Satan and his hosts engage human beings in the battle by tempting them to sin. The good angels however, are 'ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation' (Heb. 1:14). The two armies fight one another, as well as fighting against and for us (Dan 10:13, 21; Jude 9; Rev 12:7)."<sup>297</sup>

Two particular examples of this include Jude 9:

<sup>9</sup>But even Michael, one of the mightiest of the angels,<sup>[a]</sup> did not dare accuse the devil of blasphemy, but simply said, "The Lord rebuke you!" (This took place when Michael was arguing with the devil about Moses' body.)

And Daniel 10 where an angel messenger to Daniel is held up on his journey. He explains

"Don't be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer.<sup>13</sup> But for twenty-one days the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia

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<sup>296</sup> Colossians 2:13-15, NLT.

<sup>297</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 255.

blocked my way. Then Michael, one of the archangels, came to help me, and I left him there with the spirit prince of the kingdom of Persia.<sup>14</sup> Now I am here to explain what will happen to your people in the future, for this vision concerns a time yet to come.”<sup>298</sup>

The third type of Spiritual warfare is the one we all are engaged in. It’s the daily battle to resist temptation. Paul talks about this in Romans 8.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. <sup>13</sup>For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live.”<sup>299</sup>

And in Colossians 3

<sup>4</sup>And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory. <sup>5</sup>So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don’t be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.”<sup>300</sup>

I believe that this is the focus of Ephesians 6 too. It is as we live our daily lives in the world, engaging with ordinary things like marriage, family life, work life etc. that we engage in spiritual warfare. Paul reminds his readers that the opposition are not other human beings no matter how powerful or evil they appear to be, but the spiritual forces of darkness. Our responsibility is to stand firm and resist the devil. We do this through constant prayer.

The second type of spiritual warfare is the one that tends to get the headlines. It is a genuine aspect of spiritual warfare. However, whilst it tends to gain the attention of our imaginations, it is not the primary focus of Biblical teaching on spiritual warfare. This is good news because it means that we are not mere pawns in the battle, foot soldiers expendable in a cosmic conflict. That cosmic battle has already been won. No, the real focus is on the battleground of our hearts and minds as we seek to live for Christ.

### **How is this battle won?**

The sense in Scripture is that we need to hold onto two vital strands of truth. On the one hand, God’s Sovereignty means that he is the one who has won the victory already and so success is certain. On the other hand, within the context of God’s sovereignty and certain victory, the Bible never underplays our responsibility. We have a clear role to play. If that’s a paradox that blows our finite minds, so be it.

Andrew Lincoln, commenting on Ephesians 6 puts it this way:

“It is a mistake to interpret the call to stand as implying that the battle is open ended and its result in doubt... but not to see all temporal assumptions about the battle done away with

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<sup>298</sup> Daniel 10:12-14.

<sup>299</sup> Romans 8:12-13.

<sup>300</sup> Colossians 3:4-5.

and believers having no historical responsibilities before victory is automatic. The decisive victory has already been won by God in Christ, and the task of believers is not to win, but to stand, that is to preserve and maintain what has been won.”<sup>301</sup>

Let’s unpack that a little more.

### **God’s Sovereign Part**

All of the Bible passages that talk about our involvement in spiritual warfare are set in the context of God’s Sovereignty and victory over sin. For example, the call to stand firm against the devil in Ephesians 6 comes at the end of a letter where we have discovered that God is sovereign and has already triumphed. His salvation plan was put into effect before time began.<sup>302</sup> That plan is for Christ to reign supreme over everything<sup>303</sup> and whilst there is a future fulfilment dimension to this, it is also clear that He is already exalted and reigning and that we are safe and seated with him.<sup>304</sup> There is no question or suggestion that this plan can be thwarted.

The victory of Christ includes our redemption. In the language of Ephesians, this means that:

“He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.”<sup>305</sup>

And

“<sup>5</sup>that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) <sup>6</sup>For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.”<sup>306</sup>

So Lincoln concludes: “It is because this victory has been won that believers are involved in the battle at all”<sup>307</sup> because

“They are in a decisive new situation in contrast to their previous condition described in 2:2-3, where there could be no battle or resistance because they were in total bondage to the enemy. So the call to the readers to stand against the powers is also a reminder of the liberation from the tyranny of these powers.”<sup>308</sup>

In fact, the greatest part we play in spiritual warfare is by participating in Christ’s victory parade as evidence to his enemies of their complete and utter defeat.

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<sup>301</sup> Andrew T Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42, Word 1990), 442-443.

<sup>302</sup> Ephesians 1:4.

<sup>303</sup> Ephesians 1:10.

<sup>304</sup> See Ephesians 1:3 & 19-22.

<sup>305</sup> Ephesians 1:7.

<sup>306</sup> Ephesians 2: 5-6.

<sup>307</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 443.

<sup>308</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 443.



<sup>7</sup>“So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.”<sup>309</sup>

<sup>10</sup>“God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup>This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>310</sup>

When we come to Romans 8, we find that everything Paul says about our responsibility to put to death sinful desires is framed by the assurance that we are completely forgiven and that there is no condemnation in Christ and no separation from Christ. This is the context in which Paul sets up the contrast between those who are controlled by the flesh and those who are controlled by the Spirit.

The verses that talk about how we are now to live follow on from and are firmly rooted in Romans 8:1-5 where the emphasis is on Christ winning the battle through his death on the Cross, taking away condemnation. This is something we cannot do for ourselves and we are not asked to do for ourselves.

The whole point is that our salvation is Christ’s work and so we are dependent upon him. Because he is dependable, we find security and assurance in him. This means that even when Paul challenges us about our responsibility to live new lives, this is not intended to introduce an element of uncertainty into our future.

Douglas Moo says:

“Paul’s purpose in pursuing the series of contrasts is not ‘paranetic’; that is, he is not warning the Christians about two different possibilities they face in order to encourage them to live according to the Spirit. Paul certainly does this, and in language similar to the language here (c.f. Gal 5:16-26). But, as we have noted, ‘being in the flesh,’ (v 8) is not a possibility for the believer; and when we add to this the lack of imperatives and the general, third person language of the paragraph, we are warranted in concluding that Paul’s interest here is descriptive rather than hortatory.”<sup>311</sup>

In other words, when Paul tells us to be controlled by the Spirit and not by the flesh, he is not entertaining the possibility that we might fail to live by the Spirit and end up under Satanic or fleshly control again. Rather, he is saying, “Look at how different your new life is. You have nothing whatsoever to do with the World now.”

So, the Sovereign God has acted in Christ to defeat sin and death according to his eternal plan. We can now enjoy the assurance of salvation in Christ and look forward with certain hope to the future day when this victory will be fully revealed and consummated.

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<sup>309</sup> Ephesians 2:7

<sup>310</sup> Ephesians 3:10.

<sup>311</sup> Douglas J Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1996), 486.

## Our human responsibility

However, this does not mean that we simply sit back and enjoy the victory, nor do we “let go” and “let God.” We have a part to play in our salvation.

This means that we are to “stand firm” against temptation.<sup>312</sup> In doing so, we are taking advantage of the victory Christ has won. The sense is that we are occupying the land claimed, possessing the benefits. The benefits of course are, in this life, a restored relationship with God and the ability to live obedient, holy lives.

The battle is real in that there is struggle. We don’t suddenly become perfect. Each of us will be aware that there are temptations that don’t seem to go away, habits that are hard to kick, failings that when we think we have overcome them come back to bite us. Yet, the point is that though we may experience struggle and setbacks, this does not take away from the certainty of the final victory.

Lincoln puts it this way:

“The major victory has been achieved, but the eschatological tension with its indicative and imperative characteristic of Paul’s thought remains. Believers must appropriate what has already been gained for them and do so against ongoing assaults, and this is not automatic. Indeed there may be minor defeats along the way; hence the urgency of the imperatives. The writer’s focus, however, is not on the possibility of such minor defeats but on the ability of his readers to make the assured outcome of the overall battle their own by standing and maintaining the ground that has been won.”<sup>313</sup>

This is because salvation “has not removed us from contact with, and influence from the flesh.”<sup>314</sup> There is the sense that although we were once dead and are now alive and that our enemy is defeated and disarmed, he is not yet ‘dead’. That’s why our part in spiritual warfare includes putting to death sinful desires.

“Believers are exhorted to put the deeds of the body to death. The verb θανατοῦτε demonstrates that the desires to carry out the deeds of the body are incredibly strong, so strong that the overcoming of them is best described as putting to death that which is longing to burst into life.”<sup>315</sup>

## How do we do this?

So practically, what does this entail on our part? Well, I think that the secret is in identifying what it is that gives sinful desire that appearance of life and then cutting off its life source at root. Let me suggest some practical examples for how we can do this.

1. Sin appears alive and lively to me because it appears attractive. The devil promises me all the benefits of gratification. So I put sinful desires to death when I see them in their true

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<sup>312</sup> Ephesians 6:9.

<sup>313</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 443.

<sup>314</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 494.

<sup>315</sup> Thomas R Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 1998), 421.

colours. I learn to see and name sin as ugly. I talk honestly about its destructive power. Sin loses its attractive power when I recognise that any apparent benefits are false and temporary. Sin loses its attractive power when I see the greater rewards and joy that come from following Christ. Meditation on God's Word enables me to take my mind captive and to rebuild my thought life around what is good and noble.

2. Sin appears alive and lively to me when I feel trapped and isolated so that there is no way out. Sin appears powerful to me when it is secret and hidden. I believe that I won't get found out. I feel safe to indulge my desires but also at the same time I feel shame and fear. True Christian fellowship is a great weapon in the war on temptation.
3. Sin appears alive and lively to me when I think there's no hope. I repeat sinful behaviour patterns because I think I'm already defeated. Satan's primary weapon is guilt. He is the accuser. I learn to believe that I am so bad and have already done so much wrong that there is no point changing now. The Doctrine of Justification is a vital weapon here. I have a new identity in Christ. I am declared righteous. My sin has been wiped away.
4. Sin appears alive and lively when I struggle with pride and envy. I think I am different to others. I see myself as entitled to a little self-indulgence. Humility, self-awareness and a greater love for others become vital if we are to win the battle.
5. Sin appears alive and lively to me when I think I am fighting in my own strength. I need to remind myself daily of the Gospel. I need to be filled with the Spirit and live in submission to him.

## **Part 4 What Does God Do? His Actions**

## **25 What does God do?**

So far we have looked at what God is like. We've started by seeing that He is the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We've talked about his character and his attributes seeing that he is good: wise, love, just, holy and great: sovereign, all powerful, eternal, infinite, all knowing etc. God's goodness and greatness mean that he is without rival; He cannot be controlled or manipulated. He is the God who should be worshipped and can be trusted.

We now want to talk about what God does. What God is and what God does will then lead us to think about what God is called because his names reflect his character and activity.

## 26 God wills and decrees

God is active and working. We know that from what Jesus tells us in John 5: 17. When Jesus worked here on earth, healing and teaching, casting out demons, raising the dead, he was doing what his father did.

“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.<sup>316</sup> For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing. In fact, the Father will show him how to do even greater works than healing this man. Then you will truly be astonished.<sup>316</sup> For just as the Father gives life to those he raises from the dead, so the Son gives life to anyone he wants.”

Bavinck puts it this way:

“[God] neither sleeps nor slumbers (Ps 121:3-4), does not faint or grow weary (Isa 40:28). Working is integral to his being: the drive and need to work is ever present in him ‘My Father’ said Jesus ‘is always at work.’ (John 5:17 NIV).”<sup>317</sup>

I would note one word of caution here. We have seen that God is independent or A—Se. Bavinck would agree with this, so when we talk about God having “the drive and need to work,” we should not see this as a pressure or compulsion such as a workaholic experiences. It is not that God needs work to define him or to give him a sense of worth. Rather, work is a natural and necessary aspect of his character. He is not a passive God. He is active and alive. He is “supreme existence and supreme life.”<sup>318</sup>

This means that God has been eternally active. There wasn’t a point when he started to work.

“For that reason, too, he did not just begin to work at the time of creation, for his works are from everlasting to everlasting.” God’s personal attributes...are the immanent and eternal works of God. The Father eternally gives to the Son, and with him to the Spirit, to have life in himself (John 5:26), And the community of being that exists among the three persons is life of absolute activity.” The father knows and loves the Son eternally from the foundation of the world (Matt. 11:27; John 17:24) – and the Spirit searches the deep things of God (1 Cor 2:10). All these works of God are immanent. They bear no relation to anything that exists outside of God, but occur within the divine being and concern the relations existing among the three persons.”<sup>319</sup>

So God’s work starts with the active relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and what they do for each other. This where we start to talk about God’s will and His decrees. God wills things to be. He expresses his pleasure and desire in good. God’s will starts with the mutual desire of the Father, Son and spirit that each should be loved and glorified.

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<sup>316</sup> John 5:19-21 (NLT).

<sup>317</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 342.

<sup>318</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 342.

<sup>319</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 342.

Theologians distinguish between God's "necessary will" and "free will".<sup>320</sup> Necessary will is about the inner life of God. This includes the fact that he wills his own existence (life in himself) and the things we have seen Bavinck describe above about the relationships within the Trinity. It's necessary because God wills his own existence and nature. He does not owe his existence to or measure it against any outside force or standard.

God's "free will" describes his relationship to His Creation. He wills its existence. In that context, we talk about God's decrees.

"God acts as Lord in miracle, providence, and creation...all of these actions are a result of thought....God performs miracles with distinct purposes in mind and he governs the course of nature and history with a goal in view."<sup>321</sup>

So what God decrees arises from His will. This points us to the God who plans and works towards a purpose. This is planning "beyond history" "'before' creation,"<sup>322</sup>

Because everything arises from God's Will, it means that creation and history are a revelation of God's character. We see what God is like and what God loves in what he does. This also works the other way around too. We can only make sense of this world and why it is the way because of God's Revelation to us. We need Special Revelation to interpret and understand General Revelation.

Frame sums it up like this:

"God's decrees...display his authority, for they are meaningful thoughts – wise plans or counsels for the world. As such they interpret the world; they determine the meaning and significance of everything God makes."<sup>323</sup>

He goes on to add:

"Our world is a world that is exhaustively meaningful, because of God's wisdom. Among human beings, interpretation is not the work of trying to assess for the first time the significance of uninterpreted facts. Rather, ours is a work of secondary interpretation, interpreting God's interpretation."<sup>324</sup>

In other words, the fact that this world exists due to God's will and decree gives us permission to study it and understand it. Theology is the father of science, history, art etc. The fact that this World exists due to God's will also constrains us. The scientist, artist and historian are not infallible, nor are they original.

Now, there are a couple of other important things we want to say about God's will and decrees. First of all, we want to note that if God's will towards creation (external to himself) is free, then that means that Creation is not the sum total of what can be known. I guess this is another way of reminding us that God is infinite and eternal. He transcends space and time. This means that:

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<sup>320</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 529.

<sup>321</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 313.

<sup>322</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 313.

<sup>323</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 316.

<sup>324</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 326-317.

“All the ideas that are included in the divine decrees and hence designed for realization outside of the divine being are derived from the fullness of knowledge that is eternally present in God. Possibility and actuality do not coincide. The infinite being of God is infinitely more abundant than the whole world in all its dimensions could ever present to our view. What is included in the decrees is no more than a sketch, a summary of the depths of riches of God’s wisdom and knowledge. With God, all things are possible (Matt 19:26), but they are not all actualized.”<sup>325</sup>

In other words, just because God knows that something is possible, it does not mean that He has to act on it and make it possible. If He did, then He would not be exercising His will to make free choices.<sup>326</sup> This means that God would be subject to fate. Moreover, if everything that God thought came to pass, then creation would in effect be a mere extension of his thought, of his imagination. In other words, we would be pantheists!<sup>327</sup>

Secondly, we will want to make a distinction between God’s decreative and perceptive will. Frame explains that

“God’s decreative will is simply...Gods decree. It’s his eternal purpose by which he foreordains everything that comes to pass. God’s perceptive will is his valuations, particularly as revealed in his Word (his precepts).<sup>328</sup>

So, for example, God’s decreative will is seen in Genesis 1 when God says “Let there be light.” It’s seen as well in Genesis 2 when God decrees that if man sins, he will die. God’s perceptive will is seen in His precepts – His laws and commands. In Genesis 1 – 2, He commands humans to fill and subdue the Earth; He permits them to eat from the fruit in the garden. He forbids them from eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

God’s perceptive will is also seen in his evaluation. He declares his creation good. He declares Adam’s aloneness not good. Later, he will evaluate the spread of human wickedness as grievous.

Frame also reminds us that:

“Sometimes God’s perceptive will will refer not to precepts, but to states of affairs that God sees as desirable, but which he chooses not to bring about (as in Ezekiel 18:23; 2 Peter 3:9).<sup>329</sup>

In other words, God may make an evaluation that something is good, but choose to forgo it for the sake of something else. The presumption then is that if God does not decree a particular good, then there is a greater good to come.

We can see this in a finite way in Christ’s life. We are told that for the joy set before Him, He went to the Cross. Jesus saw a greater joy, a greater good that enabled him to sacrifice His life. If what we believe affects how we live, then we will immediately realise that this gives us permission to choose

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<sup>325</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 342-343.

<sup>326</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 343.

<sup>327</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 343.

<sup>328</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 531.

<sup>329</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 531.



to forgo certain temporary rights, privileges and blessings for something greater, something that will last.

This distinction between God's decrees and precepts will also help us later on when we return to the question of how a good God can allow suffering and evil in his creation.

Finally, we see that "God never fails to accomplish what he sets out to do."<sup>330</sup> (c.f. Isaiah 14:24-27; Job 42:2).<sup>331</sup> This leads us on to the next aspect of what God does. When we say that God wills and decrees, we will also want to talk about Predestination.

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<sup>330</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

<sup>331</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 47.

## 27 God Predestines

So, if God is sovereign and eternal and if God's will always comes to pass, then doesn't that lead us to a particularly thorny question? The topic of Predestination has been one of the most explosive and divisive issues in church life. It famously led to quarrels between John Wesley's Methodists and other leading Evangelicals, causing serious damage to the work of evangelism during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Revival.<sup>332</sup>

On Predestination, Wesley said:

"Whatever that Scripture proves, it never can prove this. Whatever it's true meaning be, this cannot be its true meaning. Do you ask 'What is its true meaning then?' If I say, 'I know not,' you have gained nothing. For there are many Scriptures the true sense neither you nor I shall know till death is swallowed up in victory. But this I know; better it were to say it had no sense at all than to say it had such a sense as this."<sup>333</sup>

He preferred to leave those verses that talked about predestination uninterpreted, focusing on the bigger picture of God's great love.<sup>334</sup>

Which leads us to look at exactly what the Bible does say. Whilst, as we've seen already, there's a sense throughout the whole Scripture including the OT of God's sovereign and effective decree, the word Predestination comes up in two places – first of all in Paul's letter to the Romans chapters 8-9 and then in Ephesians 1.

In Romans 8, we are told that:

28And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."<sup>335</sup>

Sometimes the suggestion is that God's predestination arises from his foreknowledge. So it's not that he determines and decrees in advance the detail of a person's life, but rather that he determines what will happen and confirms his verdict on their life in advance based on what he foresees regarding their character and response to the Gospel.<sup>336</sup>

The problem with this is that it makes God's action contingent on ours. Indeed, one might argue that it even puts salvation back in our court. God saves us because we are either good enough or because we respond in the right way.

This was certainly the position of Pelagius, a British priest who was concerned that an emphasis on God's grace would lead to a disregard for God's commands. He also believed that it was impossible

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<sup>332</sup> In this section, we're going to outline the doctrine and then will return later to more detailed questions about how Predestination relates to free will and how God's Sovereignty and Human responsibility relate.

<sup>333</sup> See, Wesley, *Sermons III*, 556.

<sup>334</sup> Wesley, *Sermons III*, 552.

<sup>335</sup> Romans 8:28-30. (NIV 2011).

<sup>336</sup> See Moo, *Romans*, 531.

for God to make anything corruptible and so rejected original sin – seeing each person as good and able to make moral choices.<sup>337</sup> Later followers accepted that sin does affect us, but we are not dead in it: rather sick and able to co-operate in and contribute to our rescue.<sup>338</sup>

Augustine rejected this, insisting that God is sovereign, we are dead in sin and need God's grace to raise us.<sup>339</sup> This was also the position taken by the reformers including Calvin, Luther and Zwingli. They insisted that it wasn't just a case of God knowing in advance, but that our salvation, along with all the acts and events of history, happens because of God's sovereign decision and decree.<sup>340</sup>

The key here is our understanding of the word "foreknew." The word is not simply referring to God's ability to know about beforehand. Rather, it describes his decision to love, choose, determine. It is an active word that links closely to "predestination."<sup>341</sup>

This is seen in the Old Testament where God knowing someone, "refers to his covenantal love in which he sets his affection on those whom he has chosen (cf Gen 18:19; Exod. 33:17; 1 Sam 2:12; Ps. 18:43; Prov. 9:10; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:5; Amos 3:2)."<sup>342</sup> Knowledge, then, is not simple information about someone, but a covenant decision to know and enter into a relationship with them.

So predestination is a little bit more than God simply acting on the basis of prior knowledge which makes him sound a little bit like a Universal equivalent of an inside trader, but is very much to do with God's ability to decree in advance. But what is the scope of this decree?

Let's go back to those words in Romans 8:28 "in all things God works together." Now, just a quick exegetical note here: the word "God" as the explicit subject is missing from the sentence here, so literally we can say "all things work together for good." However, modern translations into English are correct to see God as the implicit subject of the sentence because it is clearly God working in these things. As Moo puts it:

"The good realized is not due to fate, luck, or even the moral superiority of believers, it is to be ascribed to God's good and sovereign will, which has from eternity past to eternity future secured and guaranteed the good for those whom he has chosen."<sup>343</sup>

The point then is that it's God's sovereignty over all things. Everything comes together to do good to those who belong to him. The sense here is of a broader good, not in a prosperity gospel sense but in that

"While... Paul's focus is on this completion of salvation, we should probably include in the word those 'good' things in this life that contribute to that final salvation and sustain us on the path to that salvation."<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 348.

<sup>338</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 349.

<sup>339</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 348.

<sup>340</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 355.

<sup>341</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 531.

<sup>342</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 452.

<sup>343</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 451.

<sup>344</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 529.

However, the primary focus is on our salvation and glorification as we see in verse 30. However, what this means is that God is intimately involved in planning the details of history. Think about what it took for you to hear the Gospel. God's providence over your life meant that you were in the position to hear it and that the evangelist was there to speak it. Those factors came together at the right time and circumstances for your mind and heart to be opened. Indeed, you can look back at all the things God did to open your mind and heart, preparing the ground for the seed. Our encounter with the Gospel was not a chance one, but the planned work of a God who loves us and pursues us to bring us to himself.

This means that predestination sits in the context of that detailed willing and decreeing over all creation.

"It is from Him that the sunshine and rain come (Matt v.45); it is He that clothes with beauty the flowers of the field (Matt 6 v28), and who feeds the birds of the air (Matt. 6 v26), not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him, and the very hairs of our heads are numbered, and not one of them is forgotten by God (Matt. 10 v29, Luke 12 v6)." <sup>345</sup>

Now, we will look at the whole subject of predestination in more detail later on under the topic of Salvation. Indeed, some systematic theologies treat it exclusively under that heading. One of the reasons we are treating it here is to make it clear that this is about God's sovereign will in operation over all things.

You see, we can still slip into limiting our thinking to God's rescue plan going into operation in history. Predestination is then a response to the Fall. However, I think this would be to miss two points.

First of all, we need to remember that God's salvation plan is described as something put into place before the foundation of the world. Secondly, we see in Ephesians 1 that there is a greater purpose to this planning, willing and decreeing. It is not just about our salvation. No, God's plan for eternity was that the Father would love and honour the Son.

"10And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth." <sup>346</sup>

So, when we come to Romans 8 and 9 and read about God's purpose for his people Israel, for his church and for you and me:

"The 'purpose of election' is clearly antecedent to the facts of history. History, accordingly serves to affirm that existing purpose (Rom 9:11)." <sup>347</sup>

God's purpose is that He will be glorified and enjoyed forever by Himself and by His creation. Everything he decrees and does works towards that ultimate purpose.

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<sup>345</sup> Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines*, 33.

<sup>346</sup> Ephesians 1:10 (NLT)

<sup>347</sup> Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 346.

## **28. God Creates, Sustains, Redeems and Judges**

We follow on from saying that God wills and decrees to look at some of the specific things he wills and decrees. We are going to look at these in far more detail later on when we come to look at Creation, Humanity and New Creation.

However, I want to just highlight those three things here.

### **God Creates**

Creation is an act of God's Will and happens by his decree. God spoke and things were. Creation reflects God's character. It is vast and wonderful reflecting his sovereignty, greatness and power/ It is ordered and beautiful reflecting his goodness.<sup>348</sup>

Creation reveals God's character and so it is one of the ways that God tells us about himself. This is why we talk about General Revelation.<sup>349</sup>

### **God Sustains**

It is God who keeps the Universe going. God did not just set things in motion and then step back having made the rules. This would be okay if God was Transcendent but not imminent. God is not at a distance.

Christians see God at work in sending the rain and sunshine, in keeping our planet in motion on its axis around the sun and in holding the stars in the sky. This is not about looking to a God of the gaps who does what we cannot explain. Rather we see that God works through the very process that we observe in science.

Hebrews tells us that God does this in and through Christ.<sup>350</sup>

### **God Redeems**

Later, we will see that sin caused the fall bringing the mess and destruction into the world that we see around us.

God acted according to his will by sending Jesus into the World to save sinners. This results in a new humanity<sup>351</sup> and a new creation.<sup>352</sup>

Note that within the idea of God creating, sustaining and redeeming, we must also consider the topic of miracle. What does it mean for God to do signs and wonders. Does this go against the laws of nature? I want to flag this point up now but we will return to it later under the topics of Creation and New Creation.

### **God Judges**

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<sup>348</sup> Genesis 1.

<sup>349</sup> Psalm 19

<sup>350</sup> Hebrews 1:3

<sup>351</sup> Romans 5:12-21.

<sup>352</sup> Revelation 21:1-8.

One day, Christ will return to judge the living and the dead.<sup>353</sup> When he comes, there will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. God's paradise will be restored and his people will be raised to resurrection life.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Revelation 20:11-15.

<sup>354</sup> Revelation 21-22.

## 29 Predestination or Free Will

### The Big Question

So, this is the big question that has stumped theologians and divided Christians. If God is sovereign and predestines, then what freedom do we have to make choices and thus what responsibility do we have for our actions.

This is a question we will come back to in more detail when we look at the Doctrine of Humanity and so at sin and redemption. However, it is important that we start looking at it now as we consider God's character and nature.

### Some things we know

There are two things we want to state at the outset that we do know. First of all Scripture's teaching is clear that God is sovereign and predestines

Secondly, we know that we do have freedom and responsibility. We make choices and decisions, this is our real-life experience. More than that, The Bible tells us that God holds us responsible and much of the way that God's Word interacts with us is on the basis that we have freedom and responsibility to respond.

This means that we are not just robots programmed to operate along certain lines. Now, John Frame notes that even if we were made as robots we would be wrong to complain and see this as a dishonour because God has still made all types of creature for his glory .and so even if our nature was robotic then it would be fulfilling that purpose of glorifying God.<sup>355</sup> Furthermore, who is to say that a robot's experience of life would not be enjoyable and fulfilling. It is only when we idolise freedom that we assume an absence of autonomy must in and of itself be evil. However Frame goes on to note that the robot analogy just would never fit with our experience of God's love and delight in us (cf Psalm 8) and God's readiness to redeem us. It is not just our sense of freedom and choice that suggests we are not just robots. Rather, it is the way that God is willing to go to great lengths to redeem us that tells us that there is nothing *just*<sup>356</sup> about us at all.<sup>357</sup>

### Big Distinctions to help with the Big Question

At this stage, it is helpful to note two vital distinction that theologians and philosophers make between types of freedom,

#### 1. The distinction between Liberty of Indifference and of Spontaneity

We affirm the latter.<sup>358</sup> Liberty of Indifference is the freedom to choose and to change your desires.<sup>359</sup> Liberty of Spontaneity is the freedom to follow your desires.<sup>360</sup> Or, in other words,

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<sup>355</sup> See Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 145-147.

<sup>356</sup> Ironical humour intended!

<sup>357</sup> Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 147.

<sup>358</sup> See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, X.III.i-xv. (Giger, 1:665-668)

<sup>359</sup> Also referred to as "Libertarianism. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 138.

<sup>360</sup> Also known as "Compatibilist Freedom" Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 136.

suppose I'm offered a plate of cabbage. I detest cabbage. I find the taste foul, the texture catches in my throat and makes me gip.

If I had liberty of indifference, it would mean that I was in fact indifferent to cabbage, its taste and texture. I would be able to decide for myself at any point whether or not I like it. What a joy that would be. I could sit down to dinner thinking "this really is going to be delicious." However, I don't have that type of freedom. The freedom I have is "liberty of spontaneity". This means that when I sit down to dinner and a plate of cabbage is in front of me, I have a choice. I can follow my desires. I can push the plate away from me and say "This is disgusting. Don't make me eat it." Or I can go against my desire choosing instead to eat the cabbage, to grin and bear it, forcing each mouthful down and smiling at my host through gritted teeth say "Thank you, how thoughtful." Indeed, you will recognise at this point that I am simply choosing to prioritise one desire (to be polite and maintain a relationship) over another desire (to avoid putting something foul and evil in my mouth).

So, the type of freedom we have is liberty of spontaneity. We are not able to change our desires. Indeed, even humanists recognise that there is no such thing as unfettered freedom. We are always constrained

- By our circumstances and environment
- By our experience
- By our genetics
- By laws and regulations
- By the rights, responsibilities and actions of others.

No-one is ever completely free.

2. The distinction between being responsible by being accountable and being responsible by being liable

We are clearly held responsible by accountability, this reflects God's right as Lord to command our obedience.<sup>361</sup> As Frame says:

"In Scripture, human beings are clearly responsible in the first sense, since they are accountable to God as the supreme evaluator of human conduct."<sup>362</sup>

Accountability is primarily about recognising God's legitimate right to rule his creation.

"Now although theologians take a great interest in the 'problem' of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, it is not one of the main concerns of the biblical writers, although they are aware of it. Just as it is plain to them that God controls everything, so it is plain to them that He is the supreme authority. Therefore we are answerable to God for our attitudes, words and actions."<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> See Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 119-120.

<sup>362</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 119.

<sup>363</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 120.



This is at the heart of the problem of sin. God gave Adam and Eve commands in the Garden of Eden. He told them to eat from all the trees except from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He told them that they would be accountable. If they disobeyed his command then they would face judgement and have to bear the penalty for sin, death. Similarly, God's people in the Old Testament were held accountable for whether or not they kept the Law. Paul says that "The wages of sin are death..."<sup>364</sup> We are accountable for our own sin. We will all have to give that account on judgement day.

What about liability? Well, we already know that liability can be restricted by ability. This is a basic legal principle. A child is considered to have less ability than an adult and so may not be held criminally liable for their decisions. Where negligence and recklessness contribute to an accident, it is recognised that one person may be more culpable than another. In court, liability and blame is apportioned.

"The results of our actions are never entirely the result of our decisions. Events in the world have multiple causes, and of course none of us causes anything by his free decision alone. So courts must often ascertain the degree of liability for a crime or injury, and that judgement amounts to assigning partial liability."<sup>365</sup>

So, to what extent are we as finite human beings liable? Are we fully liable for our actions? Well, it is true to say that we are limited in ability to differing degrees but our knowledge, by our circumstances by our strengths and weaknesses (as we saw when thinking about freedom above). Even the fact that we are fallen limits our ability to obey.

However, the sense throughout Scripture is that we are liable.<sup>366</sup> We are liable because we take pleasure in sin. We enjoy it, we delight in it. This is best summed up by John:

"And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil."<sup>367</sup>

Paul also picks up this point in Romans 1 and 2. We are without excuse, in other words we are liable because our rebellion against God was willing and knowing in the face of clear, loving revelation.

<sup>18</sup> But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. <sup>19</sup> They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. <sup>20</sup> For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So, they have no excuse for not knowing God.

Additionally, even if we are not fully liable individually there is the sense that we are fully liable corporately. Our sin was "In Adam." Therefore, God's judgement is against the whole human race together.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Romans 6:23

<sup>365</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 127

<sup>366</sup> See Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 126-131.

<sup>367</sup> John 3:19.

<sup>368</sup> Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22.

Therefore, we must recognise:

- that there is a sense in which we are both free to follow our desires and that this means we are accountable and liable to God.
- That God remains fully sovereign in his knowledge, will and decrees

### **The Choice**

All of this means that we must conclude that God has made us in a way that makes this freedom possible. He does it in a way that does not interfere with his sovereignty. How is God able to achieve that? We will also have to acknowledge that we are not fully able to comprehend this truth or hold all the pieces together in the here and now

But we have to make a choice. Do we prioritise God's sovereignty and insist that whatever I say about human freedom must fit in with that (Calvinism) or do we prioritise human freedom and redefine God's sovereignty to fit my understanding of freedom (Arminianism, Open Theism)?

I believe that the former has to be the right and only way forward if we are to acknowledge that we exist for God and not the other way around. This is important because otherwise we place a limit on God's freedom and sovereignty. God's Will becomes contingent on our decisions.

### **The Pastoral Priority**

One final thought. What is the difference between theologians and philosophers? This isn't a joke by the way! I think the difference boils down to this.

God is infinite, it is impossible to know him and even to know his creation exhaustively. However, the Philosopher seeks to attempt this. He wants to discover as much as he possibly can through human reason.

The theologian (should) recognise that God is infinite and he is finite. However, he works on the basis that God is the one who reveals knowledge about himself to us. God does not reveal everything but he reveals enough. He tells us exactly what we need to know about him, us and creation.

What do we need to know? Well what does a 5 year old child need to know about their dad? They need to know that their God loves them and will always love them. They need to know that they can trust their dad and that they can rely on him. Dad is willing and able to look after them. What do we need to know about our heavenly father? The answer is "exactly the same."

So I may not be able to work out quite how my freedom to choose fits with God's sovereign right and ability to pre-determine. That's not the purpose of the Doctrine of Pre-destination. Rather, its purpose is to keep reminding me that I am more loved than I could ever grasp and than I could ever deserve and I am safe and secure in the Sovereign God's hand.

### **30 If God Predestines then why should we evangelise?**

There was an old apocryphal tale of little Calvinistic churches that didn't put up notice boards with service times because if you were part of the elect, then you were predestined to be at church at the right time.

I am not sure if anything like that has ever really happened. However, this has been one of the bugbears of the predestination v free will debate. What is the point in doing evangelism if God has already decided who the elect are and who will be saved? For critics of reformed theology, this is seen as one of the major holes in Calvinism.

I want to suggest the following reasons for why we should evangelise.

1. Our duty is to obey God's revealed will as seen in his precepts. When we evangelise, we are responding first to God's specific command to go into all the World and preach the Gospel. We are also responding to his precepts where he evaluates what is good. We have seen that God desires that none should perish. This is an example of his precepts evaluating something as good.
2. Witnessing is an act of worship. When we share the Gospel, we are declaring God's praises. Whether or not people respond with saving faith, God is still glorified when the great truths of the Gospel are announced.
3. Witnessing warms our own hearts. We are reminded of the good news and how and why we first believed. It encourages us and builds us up.

Now back in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, there were people who were saying that if there is an elect, then we cannot give an invitation or call to people to respond in faith to the Gospel unless we are certain that they are the elect. This view is sometimes known as Hyper-Calvinism because it went over and beyond the beliefs of John Calvin and other reformed Christians.

I suspect that as well as wanting to have a tidy view of the Doctrine of God's Sovereignty, those people also wanted tidy churches too. If you invited someone to repent and put their trust in Jesus, there was the risk that someone who wasn't elect could hear, be touched emotionally or even intellectually, but not reached spiritually and end up making some form of profession and joining the church.

I would also say, very carefully, that there may even be a good motive in this view point, a reaction to over emotionalised, high pressured evangelism techniques. However, even if people have good motives, they can get distorted by bad doctrine.

My reason for mentioning Hyper-Calvinism here though is that the three reasons I've described above are probably reasons that they could subscribe too. They would agree that Gospel proclamation is an act of worship that builds up the believer and is in obedience to God's commands. They would, however, insist that the preacher should be very careful not to engage emotionally and certainly not to appeal to people to respond. In other words, Gospel proclamation in that view point amounts to announcing the bare facts that Jesus died on the Cross to bear the penalty of sin and rose from the grave.

When I talk about evangelism, I don't just mean that we should give the bare facts. I expect to engage in apologetics, giving a reason for my faith. I expect what I say to speak to the whole person.

So it will touch the emotions without becoming emotional (sometimes called “preaching to the affections.”) There will be an invitation to respond in prayer. These things are modelled in the New Testament examples of evangelism. I believe we do well to follow them.

So here are some other reasons for evangelism that take us a little further

4. When God wills and decrees something, he still works through human agents like you and me. In other words, if God intends to save someone, then he chooses to do it through the faithful witness of believers who love them, speak to them, engage with them, listen to them and respond to them. God works through both a person’s intellect and emotions to speak to them and call them.
5. Calvinists have always been careful to distinguish between God’s secret will and revealed will. We should not try to second guess who will be saved, but that is not a reason for stepping back from evangelism. Rather, this is a motive to go and share the Gospel.
6. As we’ve seen recently, whilst we should not use human freedom and responsibility as a pretext to try and limit God’s sovereignty and freedom, that does not mean that human freedom and responsibility do not exist. We may not be able to work out how it all fits together, but that doesn’t change the fact that we are responsible for our response. So we do share the Gospel expecting people to respond.
7. Because we are both accountable and liable before God, preaching the Gospel brings both grace and judgement. For those who do not respond in faith, the fact that they were given that opportunity will stand against them on judgement day.

If I could say one final thing on the matter, it’s this. We’ve seen that the purpose of the Doctrine of God’s Sovereignty and Biblical teaching on Predestination and election isn’t to give us an excuse to squabble. It is meant to provide loving assurance that God is love and that he chooses to love us despite the fact that we do not deserve it. It is meant to encourage us that God is fully in control of history and our lives; we are safe in his hands.

In other words, if I’m thinking about predestination in terms of “Does that mean I don’t have to or need not bother evangelising?” then I’ve heard it in the wrong tone. Furthermore, the call to share the gospel should not be treated in a calculating manner. Rather, I should be moved in my heart and gut by the desperate state of the lost. Their need for a saviour and the wonder of the Gospel should compel me to preach it.

## 31 The Pastoral Power of Predestination

### The problem when we approach predestination philosophically

Predestination is often (almost always) seen as one of those tricky doctrines to be explained and defended (a bit like the Trinity). It's something controversial and complicated. However, just like with The Doctrine of the Trinity, if we treat Predestination as one of those embarrassing relatives to be hidden away and whose behaviour we will probably have to make excuses for, then I think we lose something wonderful.

The doctrine of Predestination is designed to encourage and even to comfort us, not to scare, divide and confuse us. Now, this does not mean that we will find it easy to understand or be able to work out and reconcile all its implications.

This brings us back to an important point about God's self-revelation. There is an important sense in which God is unknowable or incomprehensible. We are finite and he is infinite. There is no way that we could know everything about God. This, I believe, is the important distinction between true theology and philosophy.

Philosophy starts from the desire to know as much as possible about everything. It is a quest for knowledge. That's no bad thing in itself, but it can end up being about using knowledge to demonstrate my greater intellectual ability. I know for the sake of knowing.

True Theology is about knowing God through his word (Theos and logos). It starts with the presupposition that we cannot discover God through our own efforts and that we cannot know everything about God. However, we can know what God has revealed about himself. Theology works on the basis that God tells us enough about himself for what we need to live in his creation under his rule.

It is with this in mind that John Calvin, who we most closely associate with the doctrine of Predestination, makes a warning to two types of people. He says:

"But before I enter on the subject, I have some remarks to address to two classes of men. The subject of predestination, which in itself is attended with considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed and hence perilous by human curiosity which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths, and climbing to the clouds, determined if it can that none of the secret things of God shall remain unexplored."<sup>369</sup>

And so to the first group of people he warns:

It is not right that man should with impunity pry into things which the Lord has been pleased to conceal within himself, and scan that sublime eternal wisdom which it is his pleasure that we should not apprehend but adore, that therein also his perfections may appear. Those secrets of his will, which he has seen it meet to manifest are revealed in his word – revealed in so far as he knew to be conducive to our interest and welfare."<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1 . (Beveridge, 2:203).

<sup>370</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1. (Beveridge, 2:204).

However, there is a risk that we can go too far the other way. I think this is where John Wesley ends up.

“There are others who when they would cure this disease, recommend that the subject of predestination should scarcely if ever be mentioned and tell us to shun every question concerning it as we would a rock.”<sup>371</sup>

Calvin appreciates their motives, but believes they fall into a danger just as great.

“Although their moderation is justly commendable in thinking that such mysteries should be treated with moderation, because they keep too far within the proper measure, they have little influence over the human mind, which does not readily allow itself to be curbed.”<sup>372</sup>

### **The Pastoral Treasures of Predestination**

So, when we approach Predestination from a pastoral point of view, seeking to find out how what we believe about God’s Sovereign acts affects how we live, what do we discover?

When we go back to the two key passages about Predestination (Romans 8-9 and Ephesians 1), we discover that these are pastoral letters designed to remind God’s people in specific contexts that

1. God is a God of love and grace who has chosen them to be his people, not because they have done anything to deserve or earn this, but because he loved them before the dawn of time.
2. That they may not be able to understand all the great shifts and turns of history or even what is happening in their immediate locality, but that God is working everything together for their good and his glory. This includes specifically in those contexts that he is bringing people together from every tribe and tongue to be part of his people so that Christ will reign and receive glory.

Pastorally, this has fantastic implications and applications for us.

1. It means that when we find circumstances and change around us chaotic, unsettling and uncertain, we know that God is in control and knows what he is doing. For example, when we see great movements of people around the world, it can be very unsettling for indigenous communities, especially when their fears are stoked by racism and fascism. It’s also unsettling, painful and frightening at times for those on the move, forced out by persecution or moving out of economic circumstances to a strange and at times hostile culture and environment. So, to be reminded that God is working through all of these events should be a source of comfort and encouragement. We have begun to see in small ways how God is using this to bring the Gospel to communities where it would not have been heard and to breathe fresh life into local churches as we get a small glimpse into what eternity will be like.
2. It means that when the devil tempts me to despair, when I am conscious of sin and guilt, when I feel unlovely and unlovable, that I am reminded of God’s great love for me. Instead

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<sup>371</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi. 2. (Beveridge, 2:204).

<sup>372</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.3. (Beveridge 2:204-5).

of sinking into despair, I am motivated by the doctrine of predestination to respond to God's sovereign grace with repentance, thankfulness and hope.

3. It means that when I worry about my eternal security and am tempted to ask "Could I lose my salvation?" I am reminded that salvation is God's sovereign work and that he is able to complete the work he began. Predestination is the basis for Christian assurance and security.

## **Part 5 What is God Called? His Names**



## 32 What is God Called?

What's in a name? Different names have different meanings. My name means "loved." My wife's name, Sarah, means "princess." Generally speaking, though, we don't tend to pick names primarily for a specific meaning associated with the child. Names are given based on how they sound or because there is a family tradition. For example, I know of one family where the tradition was to alternate between calling the first-born son "Keith" or "Stanley." Sometimes a name becomes particularly popular because it is associated with a famous person or character from a film or TV series.

In the Ancient Near East, things were a little different. Names had huge significance and were carefully chosen. "They chose names that expressed their hopes, confidence, fears, observations, understandings, or feelings."<sup>373</sup>

When it comes to God's name, we are following Ancient Near Eastern tradition rather than modern western culture. To call God by name is to recognise something about his character, his promises and his deeds. In other words, the names of God are part of his self-revelation. God tells us what we are to call him and each name discloses something about who he is. As Bavinck puts it:

"The names by which we call and address God are not arbitrary: they were not conceived by us at our own pleasure. It is God himself who deliberately and freely, both in nature and in grace reveals himself, who gives us the right to name him on the basis of his self-revelation, and who in his word has made his own names known to us on that same basis."<sup>374</sup>

God's names, then, are not mere labels. They are not just a means of getting his attention. God "expounds his name by means of attributes expressed in adjectives ... phrases and sentences."<sup>375</sup>

You will notice that we talk about multiple names for God, not just one name. God gives his people different names by which to address him through Scripture. Each name reveals something more about him and is directly relevant to the context in which it is used.

Now, because God has revealed his names to us, this means three things. First of all, the plurality of names should prevent us from falling into the trap of building a religion around the legalistic insistence that there is just one special name for God. Secondly, because these names are not arbitrary, it means that we are not permitted to just call God whatever we feel like. We show proper reverence and honour to God when we address him in the way that he instructs us. By implication, we should also come to God in worship in the way that he tells us, not merely as we feel.<sup>376</sup> Thirdly, the different names of God help us to learn more about him. Frame argues that the fact God has many names "enables us to learn about him from many finite perspectives."<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 344.

<sup>374</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 99.

<sup>375</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 345.

<sup>376</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 346-347.

<sup>377</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 347.

It's because God's names are rooted in his attributes and actions that we've left this part of our investigation until last. As we look at the names of God, there should now be no surprises for us because we'll see that those names are rooted in all that we have learnt about him so far. Those names will reflect his Trinitarian nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They'll show us something of his invincible and eternal power, his self-sufficiency and his boundless love. They'll point to the God who wills and decrees, who creates, makes covenants and keeps his promises.

Let's have a look at some of the specific names that are revealed and what they tell us about God.

### **Elohim and El**

Frame says that this "is the general term that includes all gods, false as well as true."<sup>378</sup> In fact, the name is used to describe not just gods, but all beings that are superior to humans and so may be viewed as having god-like or supernatural characteristics relative to humanity. For example, in Psalm 8:5, we are told about humanity that God

"made them only a little lower than [Elohim]."

Now, this could refer to humanity's position as the pinnacle of creation second only to the Creator himself. However, "Elohim" is often read here as referring to the angels and it is in that sense that the writer to the Hebrews takes it:

"Yet for a little while you made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honour."<sup>379</sup>

You will recognise from this that "Elohim" is a plural word in Hebrew. "El" is probably the short, singular form.<sup>380</sup> So what does it mean to call God by a plural form? Is this a hangover from polytheism? This is unlikely given that the Israelites, as settled monotheists, were comfortable with addressing God in this way and because often, the plural form of the word is used in conjunction with singular verb forms.

Sometimes a plural may be used not so much to suggest increase in number as increase in intensity. So, it is possible that the plural "Elohim" is used to indicate intensity of majesty, glory and greatness in God. Frame is doubtful about this. He argues that there isn't grammatical evidence for using the word in this way. His point turns on our understanding of Genesis 1:26-28 where God says, "Let us make man in our own image."

"Some scholars, e.g. Keil, Dillmann, and Driver have suggested that this is an example of a plural of majesty; cf. the English royal 'we.' It refers to 'the fullness of attributes and powers conceived as united within the Godhead' (Driver, 14). Juon's observation (114e) that 'we' as a plural of majesty is not used with verbs has led to the rejection of this interpretation."<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 353.

<sup>379</sup> Hebrews 2:8.

<sup>380</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 356.

<sup>381</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 28).

The question is “who is God addressing?” Juon says that “The most common meaning is that of the cohortative.”<sup>382</sup> However, this is a creative act; he cannot be speaking with the angelic hosts. Many Christians see the plural reference here as at least implicitly pointing towards God’s Trinitarian nature.<sup>383</sup>

I agree that looking back with the eyes of fuller revelation, we can see in Genesis an embryonic hint of God’s Trinitarian nature. However, I would note two words of caution here. First of all, whilst Juon and Wenham talk about the use of “We” in their discussion, they are not looking at the specific meaning of “Elohim.” Secondly, we have to think about how people would have understood the word prior to the fuller revelation of God’s nature when Christ came and the Spirit was sent. It is likely that they would have read the name “Elohim” as referring to an intensification of God’s glory and majesty.

As “Elohim” is the general term for God, it tends to be used in more generalised contexts. Frame explains:

“As the most general or generic term for God, Elohim tends to be prominent in contexts in which God is dealing with the creation in general or with the nations of the world apart from his covenant with Israel.”<sup>384</sup>

### **El Shaddai/El Shadday.**

God reveals himself to Abram by this name in Genesis 17:2. At this stage, Abram is still waiting for the fulfilment of God’s covenant with him to give him many descendants. His only son is Ishmael, born through a slave concubine. It is clear that Ishmael does not represent the covenant fulfilment.

It is in the context of disclosing this name to Abram that God also changes his name to Abraham<sup>385</sup> and his wife’s name to Sarah.<sup>386</sup> Abraham’s name change symbolises the covenant promise that he will be father to many nations.

So, the name by which God chooses to reveal himself is significant. It tells us something more about God’s ability to make and keep promises with Abraham.

The name “Shadday connotes might and power.”<sup>387</sup> It is similar in meaning to the Greek word “pantokrator” used in the New Testament.<sup>388</sup> This means that “wherever the name appears it highlights the idea of power and invincible strength.”<sup>389</sup>

In other words, the name reminds us of God’s sovereignty and rule. God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. El Shaddai is the God who knows all things, is ever-present and can do all things. El

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<sup>382</sup> Juon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 114e. 347.

<sup>383</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 355.

<sup>384</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 354.

<sup>385</sup> Genesis 17:5

<sup>386</sup> Genesis 17:16.

<sup>387</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 357.

<sup>388</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 357.

<sup>389</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 140.

Shaddai is the God who wills and decrees, the God who predestines. He is the God who is able to bring things into being from nothing with a word. He is the God who judges and destroys evil.

Bavinck tells us that “This name accordingly makes God known to us as the one who possesses all power, and can therefore overcome all resistance and make all things subservient to his will.”<sup>390</sup> However, we must also remember that God’s will reflects his goodness, love and wisdom, so that if all things are subservient to him, then they are “subservient to the work of grace.”<sup>391</sup> This means that:

“In this name, God’s deity and eternal power is no longer an object of dread but a source of well-being and comfort.”<sup>392</sup>

So, this is the name God uses to remind Abraham that he is sovereign over history. He is able to make Abraham’s descendants into a great nation and, most urgently for Abraham and Sarah, he is sovereign over her womb, able to bring new life into their old age.

### **YHWH, Yahweh or Jehovah**

This is the name which the people of Israel knew God by as he brought them out of slavery from the land of Egypt. Bavinck tells us that “the church fathers thought it referred to God’s aseity. God is the one who is eternal, immutable being, over against the factual non-being of idols and the non-absolute being of creatures.”<sup>393</sup> However, he sees this as a completely inadequate understanding. Rather, it means “He is who he is, the same yesterday, today and forever.”<sup>394</sup>

The context for the name being revealed is Exodus 3:12-15 when God meets Moses at the Burning Bush. God promises to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses asks God “Who should I say as sent me?”

God reminds him that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and it is in the context of this reference to his historical presence with and provision for his people as well as the future promise of liberation that he gives the name “YHWH.”

“He will be what he was for the patriarchs, what he is now and will remain: he will be everything to and for his people.”<sup>395</sup>

The point is that this is not a different God showing up; it is the same God. If this God could be trusted to keep his promises in the past, then he will in the future.”<sup>396</sup>

Now, whilst this becomes the primary name by which the people are to call on God, it isn’t actually a new name in Genesis 3 and 6. We find it used in Genesis 15:7 and 28:13. So, these references are

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<sup>390</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 140.

<sup>391</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 140.

<sup>392</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 140.

<sup>393</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 143.

<sup>394</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 143.

<sup>395</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 143.

<sup>396</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 143.

not about the revelation of a new name. Rather, at this point, God enables His people to understand what the name means and what it tells them about his character. The name is about trust.

“From this point on the name YHWH is the description and guarantee of the fact that God is and remains the God of his people, unchanging in his grace and faithfulness. And that is something that could not have been disclosed before the time of Moses. A long time has to pass to prove that God is faithful and unchanging. A person’s faithfulness can only be tested in the long run and especially in times of distress.”<sup>397</sup>

### **YHWH Sabaoth, Lord of Hosts**

This name refers to God as the Lord over the hosts of Heaven or the angels. The angelic hosts in all their beauty reflect something of God’s majesty and glory. We’ve already seen how from a human perspective they may be viewed as “god-like” so that people have even made the mistake of trying to worship them.

“YHWH Sabaoth characterises him as king in the fullness of his glory who, surrounded by regimented hosts of angels governs throughout the world as the Almighty and in his temple receives the honour and acclamation of all his creatures.”<sup>398</sup>

### **Father**

These are all wonderful names. However, in the New Testament, through the revelation of Jesus as the Son, we learn to call God by a very precious name. We learn to call him Father.

Again, the name isn’t completely new to the New Testament and has already been found in the Old Testament (Deut 32:6; Psalm 103:13; Isaiah 63:16).<sup>399</sup>

However, it is when we see Jesus as the only begotten Son that we learn exactly what it means to call God by this name. “Father” does not simply refer to his ability to create or rule, but shows us even more of his great love.

“The name ‘Father’ is now the common name of God in the New Testament. The name YHWH is inadequately conveyed by Lord (kurios) and is, as it were, supplemented by the name ‘Father.’”<sup>400</sup> Here we find perfect kingship, for here is a king who is simultaneously a Father who does not subdue his subjects by force but who himself creates and preserves his subjects. As children, they are born of him, they bear his image; they are his family. According to the New Testament this relation has been made possible by Christ who is the true, only-begotten and beloved Son of the Father. And believers obtain adoption as children and also become conscious of it by the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5, 8; Rom. 8:15f.). God has most abundantly revealed himself in the name “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

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<sup>397</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 144.

<sup>398</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 146.

<sup>399</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 147.

<sup>400</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 147.

The fullness that from the beginning inhered in the name Elohim has gradually unfolded and become most fully and splendidly manifest in the Trinitarian name of God.”<sup>401</sup>

### **Coming back to the start**

You will notice that as we come to the end of our study of Who is God that we come back to the beginning. Who is God? He is the one who is all powerful, eternal and wise. He is the God who is Love and so we know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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<sup>401</sup> Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 147.

### 33 Why what we call God matters

Throughout our look at who God is, we've kept coming back to the point that what we believe affects how we live. This means that when we talk about The Doctrine of the Trinity, belief that God is Sovereign or the question of Predestination, we've not just been engaging in an intellectual exercise. These beliefs matter.

It's true when we come to the names of God too. These are not just nice to know, they matter. This is especially true given that God's names are not arbitrary but chosen by him to reveal something of his nature.

I want to identify a couple of areas here where the question of God's name matters. First of all, it matters in the struggle with sects and cults. Have you wondered why a particular sect or a cult becomes obsessed about the things it does. Take the Jehovah's Witnesses for example. Why is there such a fuss about the exact form of structure that the crucifixion took place on? How big a deal is it as to whether or not it was a single upright stake or included a cross beam? You might think that it doesn't matter that much, the important thing is that Jesus died in our place and shed his blood. However, for them it really matters. I suspect that what is at stake here is not just a question of archaeological accuracy but rather that by challenging widely held assumptions and images that seem on the surface trivial, it's then possible to undermine more significant beliefs.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also make a big point of claiming that they (and they alone) know and use the one true name for God. It's a way of distinguishing themselves from all other groups and marking themselves out as the guardians of true faith. It's a way of saying that true salvation is found in their sect and practices alone. In other words, it is a way of distraction people from the real Gospel.

Now, we should have seen here that there are a few massive holes in their argument. First of all, they've locked onto a particular attempt to anglicise the name – why not Yahweh's Witnesses? Secondly, they are incorrect in insisting that there is one special name by which we are to address God. The name is special and has particular reference to God's Covenant faithfulness, however God permits and encourages his people to use other names to address him. God cannot be contained and, restricted and defined by one name. Thirdly, it ignores the point that full revelation encourages us now to call God "Father." Indeed, the Jehovah's Witnesses cannot really know God as Father because they reject Jesus' identity as God The Son.

So, on the one hand watch out for people who treat God's name in a legalistic way. Secondly watch out for people who treat it in a magical or superstitious way. Often, people want to find out what name to use because they attribute special powers to it. If we pray in the right name then it will guarantee that he will answer our prayers. People who do that do not recognise him as truly God. They think that by using a name they can manipulate and control him. We see this type of thinking in aspects of prosperity teaching.

Thirdly, we should not be licentious or careless in the use of his names. It may be true that we have been given more than one name by which to address God but this does not mean that we can call him by any name we choose. There are two aspects to this. First of all, it will not do to import names from other faiths. For example, I've heard of well-meaning people substituting God/LORD with

“Allah” to help communicate to an Islamic cultural context. The problem is that the name “Allah” brings with it a whole theology of who God is and our relationship to him. This is a God who may be merciful but is not and cannot be eternally love because he is not Triune. The name takes us to a God who we submit to as slaves rather than know as Father and belong to as sons.

The other aspect is that naming God as he teaches us to reflects a broader requirement to know, approach and worship God as he tells us. His names tell us how we are to approach him. Our worship should reflect our understanding that he is El Shaddai and YHWH Sabaoth. This means there must be true reverence, adoration and praise. We come to worship the one who is almighty, glorious and holy. It should also reflect our knowledge that he is Yahweh, the faithful and eternal God who does not change, who keeps his covenant promises. This means our prayers will express trust and hope as we give thanks and as we pray about our daily needs. It means that we reverently draw near, our worship should express the intimacy of being his people. We worship God as father when we remember that we come through the Son on the basis of grace alone.



## **Part 6 End Points: Pulling Things Together**

## **34 God, Work and Rest**

### **Friends Reunited**

Back some time ago when we were looking at the Doctrine of the Trinity, we introduced some people to provide some case studies. These helped us think more carefully about how the Doctrine of the Trinity applied practically to real life.

You may remember them:

Albert, a 45 year old man who seems to be spending every hour at work, to the detriment of his family and church life.

Juliet, who seemed to be starting a romantic liaison with a non-Christian work colleague.

Tom and Gladys, who are going through marital difficulties. Tom's head has been turned by Ethel, a member of his home group.

Methuselah who has an alcohol addiction.

Precosia who has fallen out with someone and is not on speaking terms.

As we come to the end of our look at "Who is God?" I thought it would be helpful to be reunited with our friends from the case studies and take a further look at how choosing to believe truth about God instead of lies will help in these pastoral circumstances.

### **Work and lies**

Right back at the start, we saw that people tend to believe the following types of lies about God. First of all, they can doubt God's Sovereignty, believing that he is too small or too distant and disinterested to be able to control and rule over our affairs. Secondly, we saw that people doubt God's wisdom and trustworthiness, thinking that God either changes so that we cannot depend on him or that he does not change because he is stubborn in the face of reality. Thirdly, people doubt God's love, thinking that He is acting capriciously to hurt and harm them: that he does not have their best interests at heart. Sometimes this is because they see God as harsh and unloving in and of himself. Sometimes they assume God will love some people, but that they are unlovable.

How might those lies be shaping Albert's choices? Well, as we have also seen, when we have a wrong view of God, then we tend to create idols. Idols are our own gods that we turn to when we fail to trust in the true and living God. When we believe that God is distant or small, we create gods that are close and/or have real power. Work can become an idol. We can find meaning, order and purpose in it. We look to it to shape our days, to provide community for social contact and to provide for us financially. Work gives us our daily bread. Our employers' will is to be done, at least on Earth if not in Heaven. When your god is an idol, your relationship with it is unhealthy. We tend to worship what we fear. These are not loving gods; they are gods to be appeased.

We look to our idols for meaning when we believe that God does not love us and therefore does not have a purpose for us. We find satisfaction in them.

You can see, then, how Albert may have allowed his work to become an idol, finding comfort in the routine, satisfaction in being kept busy and purpose in his status as a manager. Now, work can be fulfilling, routine is good and certainly there should be a sense of purpose in your vocation. However, when we become dependent upon work to provide those things rather than God, then our relationship to work becomes one of need and fear. What happens if I am no longer wanted? What happens if someone gets promoted over me and I'm demoted? What happens if my employer is no longer happy with the work I do and I no longer get praised? Fear becomes the driver for workaholism.

Now, there may be another factor at work for Albert. You may remember this comment that we made about him when we first introduced him.

"As a child, Albert dreamt of being a doctor, but things didn't quite work out that way. However, at least in his current role, he feels that he does some good. Indirectly, he plays his part in saving lives."

If I was counselling Albert, I would probably want to pick up on this. Note that we are making assumptions here about what is going on and so in real life counselling, we would be asking questions, listening, talking and observing to check and challenge our assumptions. However, I can't help feeling that there is something significant here. You see, sometimes someone is busy at work and on the outside, they seem okay for a long time. However, things start to leak out that reflect what is going on deep down inside. And what is going on deep down is regret and resentment that things did not work out. Life is not what they originally expected. They are not where they dreamed they would be.

I wonder how Albert reached the point of knowing that he wasn't going to be a doctor? Maybe he didn't get the grades for Medical School or maybe he had to drop out. Maybe he found that he didn't have the right contacts, the right experience etc. and seemed to get overlooked? It's possible of course that he happily made a decision not to pursue a medical career and positively opted into engineering and management. However, it is possible that he feels that his dream was taken away from him. He may feel the shame and guilt of his own failure – how can anyone love, accept, delight in him? Maybe he feels let down by the system, that he has been done an injustice – and maybe to some extent he was; maybe the system was biased in some way against him. But maybe also, he feels that God let him down or betrayed him.

Does he think that God made promises to him? Perhaps he prayed, perhaps someone at church had a word of knowledge for him? God changed his mind.

Or maybe God did not change his mind. God, for whatever reasons, had made it Albert's fate that he would not be a doctor and all those times that Albert prayed and pleaded and his friends prayed with him fell on deaf ears. Did God fail to pay Albert back with good results for all those hours spent helping at church, doing summer missions, keeping to his quiet time? Or was God punishing Albert for not being spiritual enough in his youth or for that regretful night when he and his girlfriend lost their self-control?

Now, if any of these thoughts and feelings are there, then they are going to affect Albert's relationship to God, others and his work.

### 35 The Good God and Work

What happens if we replace those lies with truth? How does a healthy, truthful view of God give us a healthy attitude to work? Here's some advice that I might give to Albert:

1. God's Sovereignty means that he isn't where he is by accident. It may not be where he originally thought he would end up, but it is where God wanted him to be. This means that God has a purpose for him there. The purpose does not depend on him finding ways of fulfilling old dreams by proxy.
2. God's Sovereignty also means that Albert can trust Him to provide for him in life. He does not need to live in fear of the harsh boss. Practically, this means do your best, work hard, do the necessary hours (i.e. what you are legally required and contractually required to do plus where necessary what can reasonably be asked of you over and beyond the contractual hours), take pride in your work. However, learn to say no. Your boss should know that your work time is finite. You will switch your computer off at the end of the day and go home in time for dinner and time with your family. You will as far as is reasonably possible protect Sundays so that you can gather with God's people. You won't be so overworked that you are worn out with no time or energy for hospitality, evangelism, fellowship etc. Now, making brave decisions like that may cost Albert. He may well find that he's overlooked for the next promotion. He may end up finding himself on the next redundancy list. We do not promise a prosperity gospel where one godly decision guarantees all will go well. However, I want to suggest that Albert will be making good and healthy decisions and that he can trust God to be with him and his family even if those decisions lead to tough times.
3. God is good. His decisions for Albert's life were wise. God did not stubbornly refuse to answer Albert's prayer and change his mind. Nor did God have an initial plan which he went back on. Albert's failure to make it as a doctor was not penal retribution from God either. Now, it may well be that there are things Albert needs to take responsibility for here. Maybe earlier in life he got things the wrong way round and was lazy when he should have been revising or prioritised his time poorly. Those are good lessons to learn, but if we simply go to the other extreme, we haven't learnt the lesson. Furthermore, maybe the conversation has opened up deep issues in Albert's life and exposed that guilt and shame that has remained hidden for so long. In that sense, God may well be using Albert's circumstances to discipline him (as a father disciplines a child). So if deep seated guilt gets dealt with, then that's wonderful. But Albert needs to know that he cannot and does not need to make atonement through his work.

These truths can liberate Albert to a new and healthy attitude to work. The sovereign God has placed him where he is to serve him. The good God has given him the gift of work. God himself is active and at work. Hard, diligent work is a good thing to enjoy.

When we make work our idol, it becomes a cruel despot, an unforgiving taskmaster. Work in the right place becomes part of our worship as we serve a good, kind and loving master who sees, delights in and rewards our service.

### 35 Love, holiness, rivalry and relationships

Remember Juliet? We met her at the coffee shop where she was looking longingly into the eyes of Romeo, her work colleague. In conversation, it comes out that

- Romeo is not a Christian – though he has promised Juliet he might come to church with her sometime and he did attend some Alpha sessions once.
- They have started to date.

When you talk with Juliet, she defends her relationship as follows. By the way, I'm not suggesting that she presents the following points in a neat, structured, logical case. Rather, at various points, these thoughts and arguments are expressed. So, don't be surprised if some of the responses appear to contradict or cancel each other out. In fact, you will find this is true in many counselling situations and could happen with any of our scenarios.

- She is falling in love with Romeo and he loves her back. He is gentle, kind and caring. In fact he is much nicer and more attentive to her than some of the Christian guys she knows. How often have we been told at church that God is love? Well then how can we go against love?
- She has spoken to others for advice and they've said that it's okay. One person she asked know of someone who led their boyfriend to Christ. Maybe that could happen with Romeo?
- You are being a kill joy with your rules and regulations, she just wants to enjoy herself, experience intimacy, have fun. It's not really that serious yet and she'll call it off well before then.<sup>402</sup>
- It must have been fate that brought them together. Haven't we learnt in church that God predestines everything?

So, what do you want to say to Juliet? Here are a few suggestions based on what we've learnt about God. Well, we already noted first time around that Juliet is making the mistake of creating her own definition for love and applying that to God so that "God is love" becomes "Love is God" and very specifically her definition of love.

Well, we can now push that a little further. We saw that God is simple. This means that when we talk about God's love, this is not a primary attribute that trumps his other characteristics. Rather, love provides a vital perspective in on who God is but so too does God's holiness, justice, wisdom, power etc. We saw that when we say that God is "love." Our understanding of this attribute is illuminated and qualified by those other characteristics.

This has three vital implications.

First of all, it means that when we say that God loves, we are saying that he takes delight and pleasure in people in things. We are saying that he gives his seal of approval to them. God's love is characterised by his holiness, justice and his wisdom. God loves what is pure and right. So God's love does not require him to give his approval and permission to whatever we want or desire. A father who thinks he must give in to his child's every whim out love is a weak and wicked parent who spoils the child. God is a good father.

Secondly, it means that if you as someone with pastoral responsibility for Juliet love her then you have a responsibility to speak the truth to her. She may accuse you of being judgemental but true love must make judgements. That's what God's love does.

Thirdly it means that Juliet's love needs to be characterised by holiness too. As we saw earlier, holiness means that we are set apart for God. We belong to him as his chosen people. Holiness reinforces the point that God can have no rivals for His affection. Choosing to date and potentially marry someone who does not love God means that he is a rival for God's affections. One of the primary reasons for relationships and marriage is to enable two people to help each other to better love, serve and worship God.

Now this point about holiness leads us on to another of Juliet's objections. Juliet has objected that we are killjoys. However, as we saw earlier, true holiness does not kill joy or restrict happiness. We were made for God and so we can only find true happiness when we are at the centre of his will. True holiness means learning to delight in what God delights in. By the way, I think that this means we can't just leave things at giving Juliet advice. We need to encourage and help her to find opportunities for friendship, fellowship and outreach where she will learn to delight herself in the Lord.

Then we come to the final objection. God has predestined her relationship. I want to link this in to her suggestion that God might use her relationship to lead Romeo to Christ just as happened with other couples.

First of all, notice how she is redefining Predestination just as she has redefined love. She is thinking more in terms of fate which as we saw is an impersonal force quite different from the personal God who is intimately involved in the day to day ordering of our lives for our good and his glory. Fatalism also loses sight of human responsibility. We become passive and wait for things to happen to us. Predestination does not take away from human responsibility. God works through our actions and decisions.

Secondly, let's come to the question about whether or not she might lead him to Christ. We will find it helpful here to think about God's decrees and precepts. It may well be that God has willed Romeo to become a Christian and maybe God will work through Juliet's unwise and even rebellious decisions but that no more excuses Juliet than it excused Joseph's brothers for throwing him in a pit and selling him to Midianites or Judas for betraying Jesus or the people who stoned Stephen and persecuted the early church leading to the dispersion of believers around the Mediterranean and the planting of new churches. Our responsibility is not to second guess God's secret will but to obey his precepts to do what he commands and decrees and to value what he values as good.

So, for Juliet, this means that she must end the relationship with Romeo. I suspect that in her heart she knows this but does not want to admit it. Ending the relationship will be painful. There is a cost to putting God first. However, she will learn that God grants us the desires of our hearts when we learn to delight in him and not the other way around.

### **36 The Doctrine of God and a Marriage on the Rocks**

Now we return to Tom, Gladys and Ethel. Tom had been giving Ethel lifts to home group whilst his wife Gladys stayed at home. When we first met their situation, we talked about a gut instinct that things were wrong and that we weren't getting to hear the whole story. Tom had admitted that his marriage was in difficulty, there were arguments, they had lost the spark of romance and yes he had been tempted by the attention he was getting from Ethel.

Back when we first met them, we started by applying the Doctrine of the Trinity to their situation and we saw that:

1. God's eternal love is faithful love and so it is to faithful love that he calls us when we make our marriage vows.
2. God is eternally and perfectly love; the Creator is distinct from the creature. This challenges us because we realise that faithful love is difficult and we fail. This pushes us back to greater dependence upon God and on grace.
3. God's eternal love means that we can continue to depend on his love and presence in the future.

Now, looking at their case with the wider Doctrine of God in place, we can add some further things that Tom, Gladys, Ethel and you (as their counsellor) need to know. I want to just highlight two aspects of God's goodness and greatness that are pertinent to this situation.

#### **1. God is all knowing and this means we cannot hide the truth for ever**

Oh dear, I think this is one of those areas where we can as Christians be intellectually orthodox but heretics bordering on atheism in practice. What do I mean by that?

Well, remember two things. First of all, God is simple, meaning that his attributes are essential to him. Secondly, one of his attributes is his omniscience. He knows everything so that nothing escapes his knowledge. He knows it eternally so that he foreknows what will happen and that he does not forget. He knows it perfectly so that there is no detail that escapes his knowledge.

Yet we act in practice as though God does not know everything perfectly. We try to keep secrets and we convince ourselves that God is not watching. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we think that we can hide things from God. If God knows everything, then he is to be feared. Let that hang there for a moment. We want to patch things up so quickly that we don't like tough things like this to be heard. Yet if these three people are going to really grasp and enjoy the costly grace that came at and through the Cross, then they need to know the seriousness of sin. When we act as though we can keep secrets, we are in serious danger. We desperately need forgiveness. Praise God that we have a saviour in Jesus.

Additionally, this is helpful for us to know when we are counselling people. It is helpful because it reminds us that sin as rebellion against God will be characterised by deceit. We aren't shocked and surprised when we discover that others have been economical with the truth. This is helpful because it means that we go into the situation with our eyes open and it enables us to stick with people even when we discover the lie.

Secondly, it takes the pressure off us. There's a room in our church building and no matter what we do with it, as soon as you put a table and a couple of chairs in there, it feels like an MI5 interrogation room. Well, that room may look like an interrogation room, but it does not mean that pastors, counsellors and friends need to turn into policemen or secret service agents in order to extract the truth from someone. When we talk about God's knowledge, we also want to say that he is the Lord of all knowledge, just as he is the Lord of time and space. This means that we can trust him to bring all things into the light in his time and in his way. In fact, often in challenging situations, that's one of my first prayers – that God will bring the truth into the open.

Oh, and that will again mean humility and a dependence on grace for us too. We will make all sorts of pastoral decisions and give all sorts of advice on incomplete or faulty knowledge. Later on, we may look back and think "if I'd known that bit of information" or "if only I'd had a greater awareness of what was really going on" or "if I'd better understood what God's Word meant at that point," then I would have done things differently. So we need humility to acknowledge our own fallibility and we need grace for forgiveness when we get it wrong too.

## **2. God is all wise and this means that his decision to join Tom and Gladys together was the right one**

Tom and Gladys may be struggling and feel that their marriage is a complete mess. Tom may have decided that it was a mistake and, if it was a mistake, then it was God's mistake too. We command people at the marriage service "what God has joined together, let no man separate." It's God who brings two people together in marriage. It's his will and that means that it is for good. God knows best.

Now, remember once again that we distinguish God's secret will from his revealed will. We must act on his precepts. This means that we know he commands marriage and forbids adultery and divorce. So, whilst God may use the bad circumstances of a separation for his greater good in the long term, this does not change the fact that, in his wisdom, he evaluates faithful, lifelong marriage as good and divorce as bad. We must trust his wisdom on this.



### 37 Learning to Enjoy God – An Alcoholic meets the good God

When we came to Methuselah, the alcoholic, we intuitively went to Ephesians 5:18:

“Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Here we see that being filled with the Spirit is contrasted – not compared – with being drunk on wine. I think that one of the key things here is that for Methuselah, being filled with the Spirit, walking closely with God every day, learning to live under total submission to the Lord is meant to give him a taste of something that will give deep, lasting satisfaction in a way that no craving or addiction can.

This is similar to the need of the woman at the well. It seems that she was a relationship addict. Christ promised her living water which, when she drank from it, meant she would never thirst again. At this point, one finds oneself thinking “So many of the things we might say about Methuselah and his addiction to drink may well apply to the workaholic and the sex-addict.” In fact, we may see things here that are also applicable to Albert, Juliet, Tom, Gladys and Ethel.”

The Gospel is incredibly good news for Methuselah. Now, remember here that we are not promising a kind of magical, superstitious guarantee that when you become a Christian, you’ll never desire a drop of alcohol again. This would deny all that we’ve said about spiritual warfare and the call to put to death the desires of the flesh. However, I want to suggest that there are three precious things that are going to help Methuselah and those who stand alongside him keep going in that battle.

1. God is good and God is love. He is the source of all goodness and joy. We can learn to enjoy him and find satisfaction in him.
2. We cannot change our own desires. We have Liberty of Spontaneity not Liberty of Indifference. However, God is the one who is able to. He gives a new heart and this is the basis for the promise that when we delight in Him, He will grant the desires of our hearts. It is possible for us to develop new appetites and new habits: appetites and habits for the Lord and for his ways.
3. God foreknew, foreloved and therefore chose Methuselah. This means that he is safe in the Lord’s hands. The Lord will not lose him. Every time that this man struggles and falls, it is this truth that will enable him to get up again. Every time that we see him fail, find him lying in the gutter, smell beer on his breath on Sunday morning or get the tearful phone call, then it will be this truth that will help us to keep loving him, rebuking him, challenging him, encouraging him and sticking patiently with him.

### **38 How important exactly am I – when we demand too much in friendships**

And now to Precosia. In some respects, I find this the saddest of all the scenarios we have looked at. Why do I say that? It's not to diminish the seriousness of the other situations. However, I think that generally speaking we are more likely to get what is stake with the other ones.<sup>403</sup> When it comes to friends falling out, we may well underestimate the damage it does to congregations: unity is broken, ministries are disrupted and witness is compromised.

Now, why do disputes go on for so long? Why do we find that people sit in the same churches at opposite sides of the aisle for years refusing to talk? Why is it that a campaign of gossiping and sniping can be sustained over weeks, months, years, even decades? Why is it that the relationship remains broken long after anyone can really remember what it was all about?

I want to suggest that part of the problem is that we treat ourselves far too seriously. I remember a piece of advice I got a few years back. It went along the lines of, "Don't take yourself too seriously, don't take the things others say too seriously, but do take God very seriously."

We take ourselves seriously and so when someone causes us offence, we believe it is vital to defend our own honour. That's why people like Precosia stop talking to each other isn't it? Their pride is wounded.

Yet, when I say that my dignity is more important than the unity of the church, more essential than making sure that the Gospel is preached, more necessary than the potential long-term effect on someone else's walk with God, then I am putting myself on a pedestal with Him. Am I really unable to swallow my pride and go and talk to that person?

The point of God's greatness and goodness is that it means he is utterly different to us. We saw this when we described his holiness. This is why theologians like Calvin, Van Til, Frame and Ovey down the generations have been so keen to remind us of the Creature/Creator distinction and which side of the divide we are on.

It is a sin when we refuse to get along. It is a sin when we hold onto a grudge and break friendship and fellowship with others. Precosia needs to be called out on this. The pastor's role here is not so much to try and mediate a compromise between the two people. Rather, it is to call them to repentance.

It is only then, having discovered again how wonderful, amazing and glorious God is – that he is the one to be worshipped, that it is his honour that must be guarded – that Precosia can overcome her pride and set aside her differences.

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<sup>403</sup> Although I would add that this is not completely the case. For example, I still don't think Christians realise quite how serious marriage to an unbeliever is, or indeed the serious cost of work idolatry but we do realise that these things are to some extent serious in a way that we perhaps don't treat petty fallings out.

### 39 The Truth about God – and why it matters

#### What we've learnt

We started looking at "Who is God?" by seeing that we can end up believing all sorts of lies about God. These include that God is not love or that he could not love me, that God is weak, he lacks the power to act, that God is distant, unapproachable and so we are left to our own devices.

Over the course of our study we've built up a picture of what God is really like. We've seen that he is both "Great" and "Good." God is sovereign. He is the one who knows all things, who is present everywhere, who is not dependent upon any outside source of power for life, purpose or authentication. He is unchanging. He cannot be manipulated or controlled by outside forces or circumstances. God is completely independent.

At the same time, we have seen that he is "good." We started by saying that the first thing we wanted to say about him is that he is Love. By this, we meant not just that he chooses to love specific things or creatures at any given time but that love is essential to his character. We saw that because God is Simple, love (and indeed all of his attributes) is not something that he can stop doing. If God stops being love (and wise, sovereign, eternal, all knowing etc) then he ceases to be God. We saw that goodness included things like wisdom and holiness.

We have seen how these things are worked out in the Doctrine of the Trinity. Because God is the Triune God it means that, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have eternally loved each other. This means that God did not need to create us in order to find something to love. This reminds us again of two important things. It reminds us that God does not change. There wasn't a point when God started to love. There won't be a point when he stops. It also reminds us that God did not create out of need. He did not make us because he lacked something. Again, this reminds us that God is independent and not subject to any outside force or power.

#### Why this is so important

These things are important because what we believe about God will affect how we live. True belief about God will produce in us some important characteristics. I want to suggest two important responses to the Doctrine of God as we close.

1. *Humility.* We should be awestruck by the greatness and goodness of God. We should be amazed at how wonderful he is, that he is all powerful and yet that he chooses to love you and me. We should never lose sight of the distinction between creator and creature. This matters because too often, we seek after the things that belong to God alone. When we demand vengeance, when we get hung up on defending our own honour we are saying that we need things that belong to him. When we obsess about position and status, we forget our true position as creatures. What do I mean by this? Well, I think that most of us at some time are tempted to try and work out and to improve our status by climbing some form of hierarchy. That might be our position in the workplace management structure or the church leadership. It may well be about where our church sits in the bigger hierarchy. Is it well known, is it large etc. Now here's the thing. It does not matter how far up the hierarchy you climb. It does not matter how big your organisation is, how important you are, how famous, how significant compared to others. When it comes to our relationship as creatures to the

Creator God, we are small. All of those things are insignificant. And yet, God chooses to love us and to have a relationship with us. He chooses to give us a role, status and dignity. He chooses to value us<sup>404</sup> This should move us to humble worship.

2. *Trust.* God is a good and loving God. He is also great and unchanging. This means as we have seen that he will not stop loving us. God is faithful. We have the promise that it is God's will that none of us should be lost from Christ's care and protection (John 6) and that nothing can separate us from God's Love. The Doctrine of God is the basis for assurance and eternal security. It means that we can depend on God and stick close to him through all the trials, temptations and troubles of life. It means that in the good times, we should continue to trust and thank him knowing that all good gifts are from Him.

## **Conclusion**

Who is God? He is the eternal sovereign creator of the Universe. He is the Triune God. He is just and holy. He is the one who has loved me and saved me. He is my King and he is my friend.

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<sup>404</sup> See Psalm 8 on this.

# Appendixes

## Appendix 1: One less god?

“You don’t believe in 3000 gods, I just happen to believe in one less than you.” It’s one of the great claims atheists make against Christianity.<sup>405</sup> The argument is that there are so many possible options for a god to believe in, what is to say that your god is the true god? What makes your claim stand out above all the others?

Now, belief in the one true God can only come through revelation as he speaks to you, reveals his true character and causes you to see your need for him. However, for a moment, I just want to pause here and identify the problems with the atheist argument. You see there are some serious logical missteps here.

First of all, because there are many different options does not take away from the potential truth of one option and that truth is not diminished by the sheer quantity of alternatives. Indeed, the atheist would not want us to put his “no god” option alongside the 300 “god” options for comparison and with good reason.

Secondly, the atheist argument is asking us to approach our decision in an unstructured way that simply does not fit with good logical thinking. You do not have to counter all of the other options in one go to demonstrate the truth of your position. Rather, we can quickly sort our thinking into category choices.

So first of all the choice is between there being a god or there not being a god. In other words, the choice is binary. From there we move to consider what type of god. Now, even at this stage we are not putting all the god options in competition with each other. Rather, we have a few categories to choose between. These include:

- One God over many gods (polytheism)
- The God as transcendent and distinct from his creation over pantheism and panentheism where god and creation merge into one.
- A God who is knowable and personal, immanent as well as transcendent over and against a God who is distant and unknowable.

When we come to those choices, it is worth considering three things.

1. The discussion is now between people who do believe in God’s existence. The priority now is to make sure that we are talking about the true and living god. The aim is to make sure we know him correctly and worship him properly.
2. Even when we talk about polytheism, such belief systems are not necessarily putting their many gods up as alternatives to a single creator God. These gods are rivals to the Creator God not in that they claim a similar ontological status but in that they claim worship for themselves which belongs to God alone. However, polytheistic religions will often have a hierarchy with the original divine nature over and above the many gods and goddesses. This divine being is usually distant and impersonal bringing us to a third point.

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<sup>405</sup> See e.g. Ricky Gervais in this clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5ZOwNK6n9U> (accessed 17-03-2017).

3. Theists, Atheists, Polytheists and Pantheists alike have, as we have frequently seen, all got to deal with the question of eternity. This means that the choice always boils down to the one question. "Do you believe in an eternal, personal, loving God who created the World, continues to sustain it?" The true alternative to this is that whatever is eternal and higher or foundational must be impersonal, distant, unknowable. There is always only one choice between these two options.

The final point is important because it then enables us to look at the character of the God we claim to believe in. If we claim to believe in God but we push him to a distance and/or deny vital attributes such as love, sovereignty, wisdom, holiness etc. Then, we have in fact denied the eternal and personal God and in practice chosen the atheist option.

As we have argued elsewhere. God clearly reveals himself to all as the eternal, loving, just, sovereign, personal God.