

CHAPTER TWO

God

What we believe about God," said the late A. W. Tozer, "is the most important thing about us." Our belief or lack of it inevitably translates itself into our actions and attitudes.

It is interesting to reconstruct the God Joseph believed in from his reactions to his traitorous brothers and his unjust imprisonment. And consider Moses, who, because of the God he trusted, "endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). He gave up the king's palace for the desert and God's people. Significantly, faith, in Hebrews 11, is illustrated by what people *did* rather than what they *said* or professed.

The word *God* is one of the most widely used terms in our language; yet it is nebulous and undefined in most minds. Some people think of God as "a pure mathematical mind," as did Einstein. Others see him as a shadowy superhuman person or force. Still others see God as a ball of fire to which we, as sparks of life, will ultimately be reunited. A few think of him as a sentimental grandfather of the sky and others regard him as a great celestial policeman.

Increasing godlessness causes some people to urge us to agree simply to use the word *God* without even trying to define it lest we breed division. It is obvious, however, that if God *is*, His existence and his nature do not depend on what anyone thinks about Him. To conceive of God as a stone idol or as a mystical idea does not *make* him either. If I am interested in *reality*, I must know what God is *really* like. This I cannot know apart from his revealing himself to me. How God has done this is summed up by the writer to the Hebrews, as previously mentioned: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Because God has spoken and has revealed himself, we no longer have the need or the option of conjuring up ideas and images of God by our own imaginations. Our personal concept of God—when we pray, for instance—is *worthless* unless it coincides with his revelation of himself.

God's "Natural" Attributes

The terms that describe the nature of God—love, holiness, sovereignty, etc.—are known as his attributes. They are classified as "natural" attributes and "moral" attributes. Let's think first about God's "natural" attributes, as revealed by his self-disclosure in Scripture.

First, God is separate from his creation. He is *transcendent* above and beyond his creation, the heavens and the earth. He is not a slave to the natural law he authored, but is independent of it and above it. He can override it at will—though normally he does not interfere with it. He is exalted and eternal, the world's Creator, Sovereign, and Judge.

But God is *immanent* as well as transcendent. By this we mean that his presence and power pervade his entire creation. He does not stand apart from the world, a mere spectator of the things he has made.

The prophet spoke of God's *transcendence* when he wrote of "the high and lofty One ... who lives forever, whose name is holy set apart," and of his *immanence* when he spoke of him as the One who dwells "with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit" (Isa. 57:15).

God is not so totally transcendent that he set the universe in motion and then left it, as deists would have us believe. Nor is he so immanent that he is indistinguishable from the universe. Pantheism holds that God is all and that all is God. But that means you and I would be part of God, which ultimately means that God sins when we sin. If all is God, and everything else is illusion, as some hold, then what could exist to *have* the illusion? Does God have illusions?

One who sees God in nature is not necessarily a pantheist. The Bible itself tells us that the universe which God has made speaks to us of his eternal power or *omnipotence* and deity (d. Rom. 1:19-20). The Rocky Mountains, Niagara Falls, the starry hosts of heaven, the ocean's vastness—all remind us that God made them and is sovereign over them.

The prophet observed, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power.... Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer. 32:17). The Angel Gabriel assured Mary, after informing her of her privilege of bearing the Son of God as a virgin, "For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

The omnipotence of God is limited by his moral character. For example, though "nothing is impossible with God," "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18). His omnipotence applies to inherent possibilities, not inherent impossibilities. Someone has asked, "Is it possible for God to make anything too heavy for himself to lift? If not, can we say he is omnipotent?" Nonsense is still nonsense, as C.S. Lewis says, whether we are talking about something else or about God.

God's Eternity

God is *eternal*—that is, he never had a beginning and will never have an end. As observed earlier, he is the "One ... who lives forever" (Isa. 57:15). "The eternal God is your refuge" (Deut. 33:27). From everlasting to everlasting, he is God (cf. Ps. 90:2). The answer to the question, "Who created God?" is, "No one and nothing," because God is completely self-existent, There was never a time when he did not exist.

God is *infinite*. By this we mean that he is not limited by or confined to the universe. He is entirely independent of finite measurable things and beings. There have been times when God has put limitations on himself, as when he appeared to Old Testament believers in the form of an angel or a man (Gen. 18:1) and when he became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. He imposed such limitation on himself in order to bless his creatures, not because he *had* to.

It has been pointed out that our minds cannot adequately conceive of an *infinite* quantity of anything—space, power, potatoes. Such a concept baffles and frustrates us. We *can*, however, imagine a being—God—who is infinite in the sense that he has no limitations. God's infinite holiness does not mean that he has a boundless *amount* of holiness—for holiness cannot be measured in this way. Rather, it means that his holiness has no limitations and no defeats. The same may be said for each of his other attributes.

God's infinity is also a matter of "boundless activity"—that is, his power and omnipotence is at work in and in control of everything, anywhere, that exists.

God is *unchangeable*. *He* "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). It is important that we not think of God in terms of human personality, which is ordinarily volatile and unsteady. God's love is steadfast and constant; and is not subject to the ebbs

and flows of human love. His wrath is a fixed attitude toward sin and is not like our fits of temper when something displeases us.

A man who walks east into a strong east wind, and then turns around and walks west, would say, "The wind *was* on my face, but now it is on my back." But there would have been no change in the wind. His *direction* was what changed, and this change brought him into a new relationship with the wind. God never changes, and when he *seems* to be different it is because *we* have changed and in so doing have come into a different relationship toward Him.

When God Changes His Mind

The Bible speaks of God as *repenting* or changing his mind. The term describes what *seems* to us to have happened. As an instance, God threatened to destroy the ancient city of Nineveh, but after Jonah had preached there the people turned to God for forgiveness and he is said to have repented (Jonah 3:10) of his plan to destroy them. Actually, the Ninevites had turned from rebellion to repentance, and so they came under God's mercy and forgiveness instead of his wrath. God himself had not changed.

God is *omnipresent*, which means he is fully present everywhere. He is not like a substance spread out in a thin layer all over the earth—all of him is in Chicago, in Calcutta, in Cairo, and in Caracas, at one and the same time.

God is *omniscient*—that is, he knows everything, including our own thoughts. "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar" (Ps. 139:2), David wrote about God, and the Apostle John wrote of our Lord that "He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:25). Moreover, he declares, "I make known the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46: 10); nothing surprises him.

Jesus declared that "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). God does not have a physical body. When we speak of the "hand of God" or the "nostrils of God" we are using *anthropomorphisms*—*human* expressions—to describe God, though we know they are not *literally* true.

We have saved for last the fact about God which, among His "natural" attributes, is of the greatest importance. God is all-powerful, all-wise, infinite and eternal, and changeless, and we are not to think of him as an impersonal force behind the universe. God is personal—that is, he is a Person. He has the elements of personality—intellect, feelings, and will. He is self determining— as, within our limitations, we also are. He does according to his own purpose and will.

We know this of God because he created man in his own image and after his own likeness (Gen. 1:26). Since *we* are persons, God cannot possibly be something less than a person. What is created cannot be of a higher order than its Creator.

Because God is personal, we know that his sovereign will is not akin to the blind fate of Islam's Allah. It is, rather, the loving purpose of a Heavenly Father to whom His children are precious. And because God is a Person and we are persons, communication between him and us is possible.

God's "Moral" Attributes

God's other qualities are called his "moral" attributes. It is not enough to know merely that God exists; it is desperately important to know about his moral nature.

Suppose we believe that God exists, but think of him as being like Adolf Hitler. What a horrible truth to contemplate, and what a heinous existence we would have!

Holiness is perhaps the most comprehensive of all of God's attributes. "It is a term for the moral excellence of God and His freedom from all limitation in his moral perfection. 'Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil' (Hab. 1:13). In this exalted sense, only God is holy. He is therefore the standard of ethical purity by which his creatures must measure themselves.

"Since holiness embraces every distinctive attribute of the Godhead, it maybe defined as the outshining of all that God is. As the sun's rays, combining all the colors of the spectrum, come together in the sun's shining and blend into light, so in his self-manifestation all the attributes of God come together and blend into holiness. Holiness has, for that reason, been called an attribute of attributes—that which lends unity to all the attributes of God. To conceive of God's being and character as merely a collection of abstract perfectness is to deprive God of all reality." Holiness is the sum total of the perfections of the God of the Bible.

All the attributes of God are in perfect harmony and are in no way antagonistic to each other. God's love and mercy are not opposed to, or exercised at the expense of, his righteousness and holiness. Sometimes it is wrongly suggested that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and anger, but that the New Testament portrays God in Christ as love and gentleness. The implication is sometimes drawn that these are two different Gods. This, of course, is completely false. The God of the Old Testament, who repeatedly had mercy on the Israelites after they repented, is the same God who wept over Jerusalem because her people killed the prophets and would not turn to the Lord. The Jesus who spoke frequently of hell and eternal judgment is the same God who moved in judgment on Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and on the pagan King Belshazzar some years later.

Our Triune God

At the heart of the Christian view of God is the concept of the *Trinity*. Rather than being "excess baggage," as the late Episcopal Bishop Pike called it, this truth is central to an understanding of biblical revelation and the Christian Gospel. Departure from the doctrine of the Trinity has been and is one of the major sources of heresy in the Christian church.

The term *Trinity* does not occur anywhere in the Bible, but this does not mean that the idea is a later development or one that is a product of philosophic speculation rather than divine revelation.

The Trinity is a difficult concept, not fully susceptible to human explanation, because it involves categories which our finite mental powers cannot grasp. Anyone who has ever tried to explain the Trinity to an unbeliever will agree that it could hardly be a human invention. It is a teaching which God himself has revealed to us.

The doctrine is that "God is one in his essential being, but that the 'divine essence' exists in three modes or forms, each constituting a Person, yet in such a way that the divine essence is wholly in each Person." God is one Being, but he exists in three Persons.

The first Old Testament clue concerning the Trinity comes in the story of Creation. God Elohim created by means of the Word and the Spirit (Gen. 1:1-3). These immortal words were read by Commander Bannan in Apollo 8 as the spacecraft circled the moon: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was Without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light'.

Finlayson states: "Here we are introduced...to the Word as a personal creative power, and to the Spirit as the bringer of life and order to the creation. There is revealed thus early a threefold center of activity. God, as Creator, thought out the Universe, expressed his thought in a Word, and made his Spirit its animating principle.

Some believe that when God Elohim said, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26), the plural forms used "Elohim, us, our" are to be understood as a revelation of the Trinity by God to man, and that man's awareness of this truth was later lost through the Fall.

Other indications of the Trinity are to be found in Genesis 48:15-16; Exodus 31:3; Numbers 11:25; Judges 3:10; Proverbs 8:22-31, the Word is here personified as Wisdom; and Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 61:1. In these passages, the Spirit is clearly the source of blessing, power, and strength.

The Bible's emphasis throughout however, is on the fact that God is *one*. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). This truth was in sharp contrast to the rampant polytheism that surrounded the nation of Israel in Bible times. We must not allow the scriptural truth of the Trinity to deprive us of the equally important teaching that there is only *one* God.

It is both interesting and significant that in the New Testament, where the distinctness of the persons of the Godhead is clearer, the disciples were taught by our Lord to baptize in the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

John the Baptist spoke of the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit, of which his own water baptism was a symbol. When John baptized him, Jesus saw "heaven being torn open, and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11). This was a clear manifestation of the Trinity, all three Persons of the Godhead being referred to.

Earlier, at the birth of Jesus, all three Persons of the God, head are also mentioned, the angel told Mary that her child would be the *Son of God* conceived by the *Holy Spirit* (Luke 1:35).

Jesus explicitly spoke of the Father and the Spirit as being distinct Persons from himself (John 14-16).

Salvation itself portrays the work of the Triune God. The Father sent the Son to accomplish the work of redemption, The Son sent the Spirit to bring conviction and to apply to men what Christ had accomplished.

The apostolic benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2Cor. 13:14), is another instance of apostolic teaching on the Trinity.

Each person of the Trinity is fully God. Paul wrote of "God our Father" (Rom. 1:7), and spoke of Christ as the Son He loves... the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:13, 15) and as "God our Savior" (Titus 3:4).

The deity of the Holy Spirit is also clear. Peter told Ananias that in lying to the Holy Spirit, he had "not lied unto men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4).

A Semantic Problem

Part of the problem of understanding the Trinity is the inadequacy of human words to express divine reality. For instance, we speak of the "Persons" in the Godhead. We use this term because it describes a being who has intellect, emotion, and will. We can understand this. But we must be careful in applying such terms to God. Finlayson comments: In most cases the doctrine is stated by saying that God is one in his essential being, but that in this being there are three Persons, yet so as not to form separate and distinct individuals. They are three modes or forms in which the divine essence exists. "Person" is, however an imperfect expression of the truth, inasmuch as the term denotes to us a separate rational and moral individual. But in the being of God there are not three *individuals*, but only three *personal self distinctions* within the one divine essence.

Then again, personality in man implies independence of will, actions, and feelings, leading to behavior peculiar to the individual. This cannot be thought of in connection with the Trinity; each Person is self-conscious and self-directing, yet never acts independently or in opposition to the others. When we say that God is a unity, we mean that though he is in himself a threefold center of life, his life is not split into three. he is one in essence, in personality, and in will. When we say that God is a Trinity in unity, we mean that there is unity in diversity, and that diversity manifests itself in Persons, in characteristics, and in operations.

Just as the word *person* is not exact when applied to the Godhead, but is the best approximation available, so it is with the word *substance*. The Trinity was spoken of in the early church as "three Persons in one Substance." But here, according to Hammond, "substance is, of course, immaterial; it must not be thought of either as a common spiritual "stuff" or "material" out of which three Beings of the same divine nature are produced, as we talk of silver as the *substance* from which coins were made. The divine essence is not *divided* into three; it is fully present in each of the Persons. "Substance" thus relates to the one Being who is God, rather than to the nature or being of that God.

It is also important to understand the relationships of the Persons of the Trinity. The Son and the Spirit are said to be "subordinate" to the Father, but this does not mean they are inferior. Their subordination has been called a matter of relationship, but not of nature.

"The Father, as the fount of Deity, is first" writes Finlayson." He is said to *originate*. The Son, eternally begotten of the Father, is second. He is said to *reveal*. The Spirit, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, is third. He is said to execute.... Thus we can say that Creation is from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit."

The Spirit of God is said to proceed from the Son as well as from the Father. The Father is the One by whom the Son is begotten and from whom the Spirit proceeds.

Two Major Heresies

There have been two major heretical distortions of the Trinity, and they exist at present. One is an attempt to get away from any implication that there are three separate

and distinct Persons in the Godhead. Originating with a man named Sabellius in the third century, this error claims that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely different manifestations of the one God which he assumes temporarily to achieve his purposes. At times God appears as Father, at times as Son, and at times as the Holy Spirit, say the Sabellians.

The other emphasis was originated by Arius (about A.D. 325). Though Arius emphasized the unity of God, he so stressed the Persons of the Trinity that he ended up by dividing the substance of the Godhead. "This resulted chiefly from his definition of the Son and the Holy Spirit as being lesser, subordinate Beings whom the Father willed into existence for the purpose of acting as his agents in his dealings with the world and men" according to Hammond. In effect, Arius reduced our Lord and the Spirit below the level of strict Deity. Arius would admit Christ's deity in a secondary sense, but denied His *eternal* Sonship. He admitted that Christ existed before the foundation of the world, but denied that he was co-eternal with the Father. The disciples of Arius, by teaching that the Spirit was brought into existence by the Son, reduced him to a lesser form of Deity.

In more recent times, some movements, such as Unitarianism, Jehovah's Witnesses-ism, and Mormonism assign our Lord and the Holy Spirit a nature and position below that of true Deity. Hammond comments that "This is one of the most important battlegrounds in the history of the church, and no true Christian should for one moment tolerate any description of our Master other than that which assigns to him the fullest Deity, coequal and co-eternal with the Father."

It is also important that we know about God's providence and will if our knowledge of God is to be accurate. He is not only the Creator of the universe—he is also its Sustainer in the physical sense, and is the moral Governor of the intelligent beings he has created. The sweep of God's providence and sovereignty are complete and comprehensive. "The Lord does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6). This truth is echoed in the New Testament: "They the rulers did what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). God is the One in whom "all things hold together" (cf. Col. 1:17). He is the One "who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

God's Decrees

God's control of the universe is often spoken of in terms of His *decrees*. Someone has defined the decrees of God as "that eternal plan by which God makes sure that all the events of the universe—past, present, and future—take place." To our finite, limited minds there appear to be a great many events, but with God there is no time, and everything happens in one eternal moment. This is why we say God knows the end from the beginning.

A distinction is sometimes made between the absolute *decrees* of God, which determine what happens, and his *purposes* for his creatures—that is, his revelation to them of their duties. God's decrees are always accomplished, but men frequently ignore and disobey his purposes for them.

Another distinction is made between the *directive* will and the *permissive* will of God. His directive will is what he brings to pass; his permissive will is what he allows to take place. God *permitted*, but did not *direct*, the entrance of sin into the world. But

whether actively by decree or passively by permission, God is sovereign over all that happens. He is *free* in that he is under no other influence or power of anything or anyone but himself. "Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed him as his counselor?" (Isa. 40:13). He is sovereign—he has power to bring his purposes to pass.

What about Free Will?

The question of God's sovereignty and its relation to human freedom troubles many people. If God directs everything, how can man be a free agent and therefore morally responsible, if God knows in advance what man is going to do, what choice has man in the matter? Admittedly there are profound aspects to this question which are not altogether clear, but it is helpful to keep several things in mind:

First, man's will is always a relatively small part of any given circumstance. Man has no control over where he is born, into what family, or with what abilities or disabilities, advantages or disadvantages. He is subject to many influences beyond his control. He is rather like a baby in a playpen. He has real freedom, but only within certain prescribed bounds. Francis Schaeffer points out that when someone throws a man a ball, he can either catch it or let it fall. Barring some physical defect, he is not so limited that he has no power of decision or choice.

Second, God's foreknowledge, which is not to be confused with his election or with predestination, is not in itself the *cause* of what happens. For example, God foreknew that Demas would forsake the Apostle Paul for love of this world, but God's foreknowledge did not *predispose* Demas to turn back, much less *compel him* to do so. Demas acted in freedom; he made his own personal choice, under no compulsion.

Again, God foreknew that Saul would receive Christ and become Paul the Apostle, but on the Damascus Road, Saul exercised his own will in answering the Lord's summons. God knows your decisions before you make them—he knows what you will do and where you will go—but this foreknowledge does not interfere in the slightest with your complete freedom to act.

J.J. Packer calls this difficulty of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom an *antinomy*, an apparent contradiction between conclusions that seem equally logical, reasonable, or necessary. He says:

An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them: each rests on clear, solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other. You see that each must be true on its own, but you do not see how they can both be true together. . . .

Modern physics faces an antinomy, in this sense, in its study of light. There is cogent evidence to show that light consists of waves, and equally cogent evidence to show that it consists of particles. It is not apparent how light can be both waves and particles, but the evidence is there, and so neither view can be ruled out in favor of the other. Neither, however, can be reduced to the other or explained in terms of the other; the two seemingly incompatible positions must be held together, and both must be treated as true. Such a necessity scandalizes our tidy minds, no doubt, but there is no help for it if we are to be loyal to the facts."

We may take comfort that divine sovereignty is exercised by a personal, all-loving, all-knowing God. But his sovereignty in no way lessens our freedom—or our privilege and responsibility to know and do his good will.