

The Nature of God

by
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Spirituality

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

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

There are, of course, numerous passages which suggest that God has physical features such as hands or feet. How are we to regard these references? It seems most helpful to treat them as anthropomorphisms, attempts to express the truth about God through human analogies. There also are cases where God appeared in physical form, particularly in the Old Testament. These should be understood as theophanies, or temporary manifestations of God. It seems best to take the clear statements about the spirituality and invisibility of God at face value and interpret the anthropomorphisms and theophanies in the light of them. Indeed, Jesus himself clearly indicated that a spirit does not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:39).

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

body cannot exist.¹ This is clearly contradicted by the Bible's teaching on the spirituality of God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Personality

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

That God has personality is indicated in several ways in Scripture. One is the fact that God has a name. He has a name which he assigns to himself and by which he reveals himself. In biblical times names were not mere labels to distinguish one person from another. In our impersonal society, this may seem to be the case. Names are seldom chosen for their meaning; rather, parents choose a name because they happen to like it, or it is currently popular. The Hebrew approach was quite different, however. A name was chosen very carefully, and with attention to its significance.² When Moses wonders how he should respond when the Israelites will ask the name of the God who has sent him, God identifies himself as "I AM" or "I WILL BE" (Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord—Exod. 3:14). By this he demonstrates that he is not an abstract, unknowable being, or a nameless force. Nor is this name used merely to refer to God or to describe him. It is also used to address him. Genesis 4:26 indicates that humans began to call upon the name of the Lord. Psalm 20 speaks of boasting in the name of the Lord (v. 7) and calling upon him (v. 9). The name is to be spoken and treated respectfully, according to Exodus 20:7. The great respect accorded to the name is indicative of the personality of God.

A further indication of the personal nature of God is the activity in which he engages. He is depicted in the Bible as knowing and communing with human persons. In the earliest picture of his

relationship with them (Gen. 3), God comes to and talks with Adam and Eve; the impression is given that this had been a regular practice. Although this representation of God is undoubtedly anthropomorphic, it nonetheless teaches that he is a person who related to persons as such. He is depicted as having all of the capacities associated with personality: he knows, he feels, he wills, he acts.

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

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

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

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

Infinity

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

Space

The infinity of God may be thought of from several angles. We think first in terms of space. Here

we have what has traditionally been referred to as immensity and omnipresence. God is not subject to limitations of space. By this we do not mean merely the limitation of being in a particular place—if an object is in one place it cannot be in another. Rather, it is improper to think of God as present in space at all. All finite objects have a location. They are somewhere. This necessarily prevents their being somewhere else. With God, however, the question of whereness of location is not applicable. God is the one who brought space (and time) into being. He was before there was space. He cannot be localized at a particular point. Consider here Paul's statement that God does not dwell in manmade shrines, because he is the Lord of heaven and earth; he made the world and everything in it (Acts 17:24-25)

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

Time

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

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

Omega" serve to convey and the same idea (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

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

Knowledge

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

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

God has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to revise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have. One can therefore pray confidently, knowing that God will not grant something that is not good.

Power

Finally, God's infinity may also be considered in relationship to what is traditionally referred to as the omnipotence of God. By this we mean that God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power. This is taught in Scripture in several ways. There is evidence of God's unlimited power in one of his names, *'el Shaddai*. When God appeared to Abraham to re-affirm his covenant, he identified

himself by saying, "I am God Almighty" (Gen. 17:1). We also see God's omnipotence in his overcoming apparently insurmountable problems. The promise in Jeremiah 32:15 that fields will once again be bought and sold in Judah seems incredible in view of the impending fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Jeremiah's faith, however, is strong: "Ah Lord GOD! ... Nothing is too hard for thee" (v. 17). And after speaking of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus responds to his disciples' question as to who can then be saved: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26).

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

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

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

Constancy

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

This divine constancy involves several aspects. There is first no quantitative change. God cannot increase in anything, because he is already perfection. Nor can he decrease, for if he were to, he would cease to be God. There also is no qualitative change. The nature of God does not undergo modification. Therefore, God does not change his mind, plans, or actions, for these rest upon his nature, which remains unchanged no matter what occurs. Indeed, in Numbers 23:19 the argument is that since God is not human, his actions must be unalterable. Further, God's intentions as well as his plans are always consistent, simply because his will does not change. Thus, God is ever faithful to his promises, for example, his covenant with Abraham.

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

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

Some interpretations of the doctrine of divine constancy, expressed as immutability, have actually drawn heavily upon the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive. But the

biblical view is not that God is static but stable. He is active and dynamic, but in a way which is stable and consistent with his nature.

What we are dealing with here is the dependability of God. He will be the same tomorrow as he is today. He will act as he has promised. He will fulfill his commitments. The believer can rely upon that (Lam. 3:22-23; 1 John 1:9)

God is a great God. The realization of this fact stirred biblical writers such as the psalmists. And this

realization stirs believers today, causing them to join with the songwriter in proclaiming:

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:
How great Thou Art! How great Thou art! *

Endnotes:

1. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, 36th ed. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), p. 48.
2. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 40-45.
3. See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1962), especially his criticism of Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950).

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ELEVEN

The Goodness of God

Moral Qualities

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

Moral Purity

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

1. Holiness

There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. The first is his uniqueness. He is totally separate

from all of creation. This is what Louis Berkhof called the "majesty-holiness" of God.¹ The uniqueness of God is affirmed in Exodus 15:11: "Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The foundations of the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke. The seraphs cried out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:1-4). The Hebrew word for "holy" (*qādōsh*) means "marked off" or "withdrawn from common, ordinary use." The verb from which it is derived suggests "to cut off" or "to separate." Whereas in the religions of the peoples around Israel the adjective *holy* was freely applied to objects, actions, and personnel involved in the worship, in Israel's covenant the people themselves are also to be holy. God not only is personally free from any moral wickedness or evil. He is unable to tolerate the presence of evil. He is, as it were, allergic to sin and evil. Isaiah, upon seeing God,

became very much aware of his own impurity. He despaired, “Woe is me? For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa. 6:5). Similarly, Peter, on the occasion of the miraculous catch of fish, realizing who and what Jesus was said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). When one measures one’s holiness, not against the standard of oneself or of other humans, but against God, the need for a complete change of moral and spiritual condition becomes apparent.

2. Righteousness

The second dimension of God’s moral purity is his righteousness. This is, as it were, the holiness of God applied to his relationships to other beings. The righteousness of God means, first of all, that the law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is. Psalm 19:7-9 puts it this way: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.” In other words, God commands only what is right, and what will therefore have a positive effect upon the believer who obeys.

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

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

A question which has been a topic of debate down through the history of Christian thought is, What makes certain actions right and others wrong? In medieval times one school of thought, the realists, maintained that God chooses the right because it is right.² What he calls good could not have been designated otherwise, for there is an intrinsic good in kindness and an inherent evil in cruelty. Another school of thought, the nominalists, asserted that it is God’s choice which makes an action right. God does not choose an action because of some intrinsic value in it.³ Rather, it is his sovereign choice of that action which makes it right. He could have chosen

otherwise; if he had done so, the good would be quite different from what it is. Actually, the biblical position falls between realism and nominalism. The right is not something arbitrary, so that cruelty and murder would have been good if God had so declared. In making decisions, God does follow an objective standard of right and wrong, a standard which is part of the very structure of reality. But that standard to which God adheres is not external to God—it is his own nature. He decides in accordance with reality, and that reality is himself.

3. Justice

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

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

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

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

Integrity

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

1. Genuineness

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

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

2. Veracity

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

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

use the same set for both types of dealing (Deut. 25:13-15). God's people are to be thoroughly honest in the presentation of the gospel message as well. While some might rationalize that the significance of the end justifies use of the means of misrepresentation, Paul makes clear that "we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). A God of truth is best served by presentation of the truth.

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

3. Faithfulness

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

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

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

Love

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

is love.... So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” In general, God’s love may be thought of as his eternal giving or sharing of himself. As such, love has always been present among the members of the Trinity. Jesus said, “But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31). The triunity of God means that there has been an eternal exercise of God’s love, even before there were any created beings. The basic dimensions of God’s love to us are: (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.

1. Benevolence

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

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

This self-giving, unselfish quality of the divine love is seen in what God has done. God’s love in sending his Son to die for us was not motivated by our prior love for him. The apostle John says, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The whole of Romans 5:6-10 elaborates upon the same theme. Note especially verse 8 (“But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”) and verse 10 (“while we were enemies we were reconciled to God”). This divine love not only took the initiative in creating the basis of salvation by sending Jesus Christ, but it also continuously seeks us out. The three parables of Jesus in Luke 15 emphasize this strongly.

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

2. Grace

Grace is another attribute which is part of the manifold of God’s love. By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity. This grace is to be distinguished from the benevolence (unselfishness) that we just described. Benevolence is simply the idea that God does not seek his own good, but rather that of others. It would be possible for God to love unselfishly, with a concern for others, but still to insist that this love be deserved, thus requiring each person to do something or offer something that would earn the favors received or to be received. Grace, however, means that God supplies us with undeserved favors. He requires nothing from us.

The graciousness of God is, of course, prominent in the New Testament. Some have suggested that the Old Testament picture of God is quite different, however. Yet numerous passages in the Old Testament speak of the graciousness of God. In Exodus 34:6, for example, God says of himself: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” In the New Testament there are passages which explicitly relate salvation to the extravagant gift of God’s grace. For example, Paul says in Ephesians 2: 8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast” (cf. Titus 2:11; 3:4-7). Salvation is indeed the gift of God. Sometimes the justice of God is impugned on the grounds that some receive this grace of God and others do not. That any

are saved at all is, however, the amazing thing. If God gave to all what they deserve, none would be saved. Everyone would be lost and condemned.

3. Mercy

God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy. If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty, and condemned, mercy sees them as miserable and needy. The psalmist said, "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Similar ideas are found in Deuteronomy 5:10; Psalm 57:10; and Psalm 86:5. The attribute of mercy is seen in the compassion which Jesus felt when people suffering from physical ailments came to him (Mark 1:41). Their spiritual condition also moved him (Matt. 9:36). Sometimes both kinds of needs are involved. Thus, in describing the same incident, Matthew speaks of Jesus' having compassion and healing the sick (Matt. 14:14), while Mark speaks of his having compassion and teaching many things (Mark 6:34). Matthew elsewhere combines the two ideas. When Jesus saw the crowds were helpless like sheep without a shepherd, he had compassion on them. So he went about "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (Matt. 9:35-36).

4. Persistence

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

God's long-suffering was particularly apparent with Israel; this was, of course, an outflow of his faithfulness to them. The people of Israel repeatedly rebelled against Jehovah, desiring to return to Egypt, rejecting Moses' leadership, setting up idols for worship, falling into the practices of the people about them, and inter-marrying with them. There must have been times when the Lord was inclined to

Abandon his people. A large-scale destruction of Israel on the fashion of the flood would have been most appropriate, yet the Lord did not cut them off.

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

On one occasion Peter came to Jesus (on behalf of the disciples, no doubt) and asked how often he should forgive a brother who sinned against him: as many as seven times? Jesus reply to Peter, which has been interpreted as either "77 times" or "490 times," indicates the persistent, relentless nature of the love that is to be characteristic of a follower of the Lord. Jesus himself demonstrated such persistent love with Peter. Though Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus forgave him, just as he had with so many of his other shortcomings. As a matter of fact, the angel at the tomb instructed the three women to go tell the disciples *and Peter* that Jesus was going to Galilee where they would see him (Mark 16:7). God's faithfulness and forbearance were also manifested in his not casting off other believers who had sinned and failed him: Moses, David, Solomon, and many more.

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

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

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

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

Actually, love and justice have worked together in God's dealing with humanity. God's justice requires that there be payment of the penalty for sin. God's love, however, desires that we be restored to fellowship with him. The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the justice and the love of God have been maintained. And there really is not tension between the two. There is tension only if one's view of love requires that God forgive sin

without any payment being made. But that is to think of God as different from what he really is. Moreover, the offer of Christ as atonement shows a greater love on God's part than would simply indulgently releasing people from the consequences of sin. To

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

Endnotes:

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 73.
2. E.g., Anselm *Cur Deus homo?* 1.12.
3. William of Ockham, *Reportatio*, book 3, questions 13C, 12CCC.
4. Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 227-28.
5. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, pp. 377-78.