

The Plumb Line

A Teaching Ministry of Fellowship Bible Church



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Fellowship Bible Church ♦ Greenville, South Carolina

SYLLABUS OF LESSONS

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Existence & Attributes of God

Session 1 – An Atmosphere of Unbelief

There was a time when one could begin the study of God – the evidence of His existence and the nature of His attributes – in the midst of almost universal belief in that existence, and near universal agreement as to those attributes. And this atmosphere of *theism* was not limited to the ‘Christian’ world alone, for the Christian theologian could speak with the Jewish rabbi or the Islamic mullah, and find remarkable agreement as to the doctrine of God. No doubt there would be some trouble in the conversation if a Buddhist or Hindu teacher joined in, but across a large swath of the earth, and among a large portion of the world’s population, there was at least a common starting point: God Exists. But this era of general agreement ended about a century and a half ago, and in many cases Christian theologians and apologists have not yet adjusted. Atheism – both *theoretical* and *practical* – are far more prevalent, and in some areas of the world even dominant, than could have been imagined one hundred fifty years ago.

It is not so clear that any atheists actually existed. Searching for full-fledged deniers of God before the eighteenth century sometimes resembles hunting the unicorn. Part of the problem is that, lacking a tradition of open unbelief, contemporaries also lacked the vocabulary to describe it. Thus the word ‘atheism’ could apply to everything from denial of the Trinity to gross immorality – and did.¹

To some extent the Church itself is responsible for this; not culpable, *per se*, but responsible. It has always been the teaching of the three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – that God is, in Himself, *incomprehensible*. Rationalism took this to mean ‘unknowable,’ and from unknowable it was not a huge step to ‘unknown.’ But theologians meant something completely different by the term ‘incomprehensible,’ actually they meant exactly what the word meant: cannot be comprehended. “Because God is infinite and we are finite, or limited, we can never fully understand God. In this sense God is said to be *incomprehensible*, where the term

¹ Turner, James; *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1985); 26.

incomprehensible is used with an older and less common sense, 'unable to be fully understood.'² Comprehension means total knowledge (literally, to think around something so as to encompass it with understanding). By the very definition of the term 'God,' we conclude rationally that He is a Being incapable of being known by finite Man in a *comprehensive* manner. So says the Apostle Paul in his explosive doxology from Romans 11,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! (Romans 11:33)

Job also realizes toward the end of his trial, the incomprehensibility of God,

*Behold, these are the fringes of His ways;
And how faint a word we hear of Him!
But His mighty thunder, who can understand?* (Job 26:14)

It is reasonable, therefore, for us to conclude that the various attempts made by Jewish and Christian theologians to 'prove' the existence of God were by no means attempts to comprehensively establish the nature of His Being. For the most part (though there were undoubtedly those who overstepped the bounds of intellectual probity), such arguments as the Ontological, the Argument from Causation, or that from Design, were meant simply to show that a belief in God is rational; at the very least it is certainly not *irrational*. Subjected to the perennial assaults of Enlightenment rationalism, however, the weaknesses of these arguments became apparent, and the misconception that these arguments were intended to *prove* comprehensively the existence of God led to the conclusion in many circles, that God does not exist. But this is itself irrational: for man's inability to prove comprehensively the existence of something does not logically *disprove* its existence, it merely proves man's inability. Still, the distance between man's rational capacity and God's Being grew wider through the Enlightenment, with Deism eventually elevating Deity beyond reach. "If the difference between God and man is exaggerated,

² Grudem, Wayne; *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; 1994); 149.

then the Infinite and the finite are so separated from one another that religion becomes impossible. God is practically reduced to a nonentity, by being placed wholly outside the sphere of human apprehension."³ Agnosticism results, which quickly descends into either theoretical or practical atheism.

The saner theologians across the ages have acknowledged that all attempted 'proofs' are mere approximations to that which has been revealed in Nature and in Man regarding the existence of a divine Being. Herman Hoeksema writes in regard to the Knowability of God,

From the earliest times the church emphasized the incomprehensibility of God, and the absolute incapability of man to find Him out, to investigate His Being, and of himself to say anything about Him...Man, mere man, by his own power can neither affirm nor deny His existence. He may conclude to a final Cause, but a cause – even a final cause – still belongs to our world. And God is not the final Cause: He is God! man may conceive of a supreme being, but God is not relatively supreme with relation to the world; He is the Lord, the Being of beings, the Absolute, the Self-existent One, and Jehovah is His name.⁴

Hoeksema's purpose is not to motivate intellectual atheism, but rather to remind us that our knowledge of God is first, incomplete; and second, wholly dependent upon the divine self-disclosure. Thus atheism is only rational if there is indeed no evidence that God has disclosed His being to the sensory world of man. If God neither spoke nor acted, nor gave to Man the ears to hear or eyes to see, then the truest form of atheism would prevail throughout mankind: the concept of God would not even enter into the vocabulary of humanity. The word 'atheism' would have no meaning, for there would be no 'theos' in whom not to believe. As it is, the atheism that does pervade Western civilization is a fraud: it is the denial of a God of whom the atheist knows enough to deny. It is a vigorous rejection of the evidence of Nature and of Conscience, and it is not the act of an intellectual but rather that of a fool.

³ Shedd, William G. T.; *Dogmatic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers; 1980); 156.

⁴ Hoeksema, Herman; *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association; 1966); 26.

The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."

They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.

The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men

To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God.

They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt;

There is no one who does good, not even one.

(Psalm 14:1-3)

Perhaps the greatest book written within the Christian community on the topic of human knowledge of God is the work by the Puritan Stephen Charnock, titled *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*. In his opening lecture, Charnock discusses the folly of atheism, a state of mind and profession that was, in his day, a capital crime in most European states. Indeed, Charnock was writing somewhat in a vacuum, for atheism— at least in the outward admission of the view - was rarer among men than



Stephen Charnock (1626-80)

the belief that the earth was flat. Still, based on the words of the psalmist, Charnock rightfully concluded that atheism is bound up in the fallen human heart, though men might refrain from publicizing their folly (as they largely did in his day, for fear of the physical consequences of such an admission). Charnock writes,

No man is exempted from some spice of atheism by the depravity of his nature, which the psalmist intimates, 'there is none that doeth good;' though there are infallible convictions of the being of a God, that they cannot absolutely deny it; yet there are some atheistical babblings in the hearts of men, which evidence themselves in their actions.⁵

Flagrant atheism was indeed rare - virtually non-existent - in Charnock's world. Therefore he writes of *practical atheism*, whereby a man verbally acknowledges the existence of God, and usually in that part of the world a *Christian* God, but lives such a life as if there were no God at all. But today atheism is both rampant and popular, viewed by many as being the true intellectual response to the question. Instead of theologians

⁵ Charnock, Stephen; *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1979); 25.

positing arguments for the divine existence, modern scientists and philosophers are setting forth arguments for the *non*-existence of God.

Yet failing to believe somehow in some sort of deity was not merely rare, it was a bizarre aberration...Before about the middle of the nineteenth century, atheism or agnosticism seemed almost palpably absurd; shortly afterward unbelief emerged as an option fully available within the general contours of Western culture, a plausible alternative to the still dominant theism.⁶

Thus we begin our study of Theology not by delving immediately into the data from which we may conclude the existence of the biblical God, but rather by considering the environment – the atmosphere of unbelief – in which we now live and study.

The first argument for the non-existence of God is the **moral argument**. Most believers have heard it in some form or another, as it constitutes the most pedestrian of atheistic defenses. The argument goes thus: if there existed a God who was all-good, then there would be no evil or misfortune in the world; and if that God were all-powerful, then any such evil would again be prevented. Thus either God, if there is such a Being, is either not all-good or not all-powerful, or both. Since omnibenevolence and omnipotence are universal attributes of the theistic God, the logical conclusion is that there is no such Being. In a nutshell, this argument centers on the ‘problem of Evil.’ The attempt to theistically explain the existence of evil in a world created by an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God are called *theodicy* (one wonders if the word should be spelled *theodysey*, for the attempts are often epic journeys of the imagination), and will, Lord-willing, be the topic of a later discussion. But back to the problem at hand: the contention by the atheist that such a God as Christians, Jews, and Muslims conjure cannot exist – at least not in the form in which He is presented – due to the presence of evil in the world.

But the moralistic atheist defeats his case upon stating it, for the very mention of ‘evil’ is an admission of moral gradation within the world (and usually it is recognized

⁶ Turner; *xii*.

in both the rational and irrational world). Evil and Good are moral designations that constitute moral judgment. The common recognition of Good as opposed to Evil presupposes a common standard to which all mankind has an awareness and by which humanity has historically passed a common judgment.⁷ Furthermore, this argument assumes – rather, presumes – that a Good God could have no purpose for allowing Evil into His creation, and that an Omnipotent God would not allow it. This is to speak for God, something irrational indeed coming from a finite creature. It is one thing to say that we do not understand how and/or why God permits evil into His otherwise good creation, and quite another to say that He cannot have a reason to do so. Human ignorance does not constitute a valid argument for the non-existence of God.

The next two arguments for the non-existence of God are both ‘scientific,’ in that they come from the modern scientific community and are generally representative of that segment of modern society. “And out of this work arises a vague but compelling impression that the rise of science, and the spread of critical ways of thinking associated with science, undermined belief in God.”⁸ The first of these is the **Evolutionary argument**; the second the **Genetic argument**. Both arguments stem from the philosophical foundation of *materialism* and comprise a *mechanistic* view of the universe. Philosophical Materialism – not the same as consumerism, as the term frequently connotes today – is the view that the universe is comprised solely of inanimate matter and energy, and that all ‘animate’ functions are but the products of the mechanistic processes of chemicals. Richard Swinburne offers this definition of Materialism,

What I mean here by materialism is the view that the personal and mental, though distinct from it, are fully caused by the physical; that the existence of persons, and their having the purposes, powers, and beliefs they do, has a full inanimate explanation.⁹

⁷ Much has been made by the atheist in regard to variations among cultures and subcultures with regard to ‘right and wrong,’ but the variations are both few and minor when compared to the uniformity of moral judgment across both time and culture within the human race.

⁸ Turner; *xii*.

⁹ Swinburne, Richard; *Is There A God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1998); 39.



Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

On the grounds, therefore, of this materialistic philosophy, the Evolutionist claims that there is no basis in science – nor, for that matter, a *need* – for a God. All ‘creative’ processes are the result of arbitrary chemical reactions within the realm of Matter and Energy, all of which started with a Big Bang, billions and billions of years ago. The apparent orderliness of the universe – a feature that theists claim points to the existence of a Supreme Designer – is viewed by the Evolutionist as merely the product of chance and statistics, carried out over great expanses of time. The famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell, in his equally famous essay entitled *Why I am Not a Christian*, attempts to attack the Argument from Design for the Existence of God, but like most evolutionists, merely falls back to the moral argument for the non-existence of God. Russell considers the following to be an adequate refutation of the Design Theory,

When you come to look into this argument from design, it is a most astonishing thing that people can believe that this world, with all the things that are in it, with all its defects, should be the best that omnipotence and omniscience have been able to produce in millions of years. I really cannot believe it. Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists?¹⁰

The Evolutionists does not deny the appearance of Design in the universe; he merely attributes it to chance and to ‘natural selection.’ Design and order, he says, do not come from an antecedent plan (which implies a planner), but rather represent that set of arbitrary mutations and reactions that have survived, perhaps precisely because of their orderliness. Russell adds that because this world is not what he would consider ‘perfect,’ there cannot have been an omniscient and omnipotent Designer, who would certainly have done better. The bottom line in all such atheistic argumentation is that everything started (if the concept of ‘starting’ can even be used) with Matter and Energy, and that no

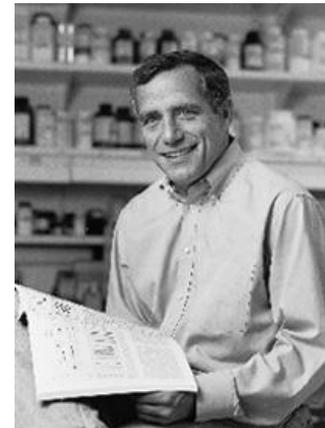
¹⁰ Russell, Bertrand; *Why I Am Not A Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc; 1957); 10.

outside force, design, or influence is necessary for the explanation of all that man can observe today.

This argument for the non-existence of God poses the greatest danger to the survival of a Christian worldview in the 21st Century. Evolution has been accepted by Western society as scientific truth, and the materialistic philosophy that undergirds this brand of atheism now pervades modern science as well as the arts. It is not hard to imagine a time when theism will become the capital crime that atheism once was.

The second 'scientific' argument for the non-existence of God also flows from an Evolutionary worldview; it is the **Genetic Argument**. The rationale behind this argument is a logical progression from the materialistic premise of evolutionary science: people believe in 'god' simply because they have some genetic disposition to that belief, a 'God Gene.' Dean Hamer, an internationally renowned geneticist and filmmaker, has posited the existence of both this 'God Gene' and the 'Gay Gene' - the chromosomal basis for religion and homosexuality. The title of his book on the subject of our current

study is illustrative of his conclusions: *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. The book does trace a very interesting summary of studies into the lives and behaviors of twins, but the conclusions that Hamer draws with respect to 'faith' and 'religion' are pure speculation on his part. Taking a purely Evolutionary perspective, Hamer writes, "I argue that one of the important roles that the God genes play in natural selection is to provide human beings with an innate sense of optimism."¹¹ Given the incredible obstacles that faced prima-



Dean Hamer (1951-)

tive man for survival, one might think that 'optimism' was the *sine qua non* of sustaining life, and that all mankind would thus possess the 'God gene.' One of the interesting conclusions that Hamer draws from his research runs contrary to the conventional

¹¹ Hamer, Dean; *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes* (New York: Doubleday; 2004); 12.

wisdom among atheists: that religious people are so due to the influences of environment, particularly parental indoctrination. Bertrand Russell is a representative of the majority atheistic view, "Most people believe in God because they have been taught from early infancy to do it."¹² But Hamer applies the science of genetics to explode this view. He writes, "The implication [i.e., of his genetic studies] is that spirituality, at least as measured by self-transcendence, doesn't result from outside influences."¹³ But Hamer does not become an apologist for theism, and his Evolutionary bias shines through,

Where did God genes come from?...They came from our parents, who inherited them from their ancestors. Those ancestors received them from their predecessors, and so on down the evolutionary line to the very beginnings of life on Earth...Over the ages, of course, the genes evolved. At every step, the genes that helped their owners survive and reproduce were most likely to be passed on to the next generation...Only the genes that promoted our past survival and reproduction are still with us today.¹⁴

So why, we may ask, is the prevalence of atheism increasing today? Should not that gene, or those genes, have been eradicated by the greater 'survival and reproductive' power of the God genes that brought mankind to near universal theism just a few centuries ago? And how is it that atheism now proves to be more beneficial to mankind, more conducive to reproduction, when it is, by Hamer's own implication, a more pessimistic genetic disposition? The behavioral evolutionist might answer that modern man is 'adapting' to the greater discoveries of science, and the resultant lack of any need for 'faith' or 'God.' These adaptations somehow (it is theorized) better prepare mankind for survival and reproduction and will, therefore, become the dominant genetic trait of future generations. God is not dead; He has simply been genetically engineered out of existence.

But this process is not genetic, it is philosophical. Furthermore, it did not begin with modern science, but rather with the ancient Greeks of the first millennia B.C. Greek

¹² Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian*; 14.

¹³ Hamer; 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; 140.

philosophers were also evolutionists, in spite of their pantheon of gods. Aristotle, perhaps the foremost 'scientist' of the ancient era, believed that man was entirely a product of adaptation to his environment. He posited the theory that infants are born into the world as *tabula rasa* - blank slates - to be written upon through sensory perception. What a man becomes is determined by his senses; reality grows within him through that which his eyes, ears, hands, and mouth experience of the world around him. This philosophical worldview, which was actually synthesized with medieval Christianity through the work of Thomas Aquinas, is incredibly detrimental to a realistic view of the universe. In other words, Aristotelianism undermines the natural, innate belief that what we perceive to be real, is actually real. This, in turn, strikes at the very heart of knowledge; for if what is perceived is not necessarily real, there can be no real knowledge of anything. Modern science has embraced this philosophical perspective, without realizing that it is as damning to science as it is to faith.

Still, it took a long time for the ultimate effects of Aristotle to seep into the composite thought patterns of Western civilization. The denouement was a classic in human folly: the elevation of human reason to the level of supreme arbiter of knowledge, followed by its crashing fall into near oblivion (the era in which we now live, called 'post-Modernism'). The rise of the human mind is codified in the philosophy of René Decartes; its precipitous fall in that of Immanuel Kant. Decartes famously challenged (in his mind) the rationality of everything that he could possibly bring to his mind as an object of doubt. At the end, he was left with himself as the doubter, and he



René Descartes (1596-1650)

could not doubt that it was he who doubted. Descartes concluded, "*Cogito, ergo sum*" - "I think, therefore I am." This astounding discovery (it is impossible to type with sarcasm...) is widely credited with marking the beginning of the Enlightenment, the exaltation of human



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

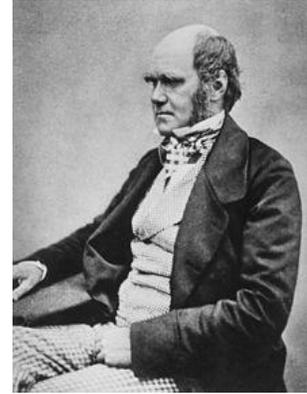
reason as the end-all of the ultimate explanations for reality. That was in 1648. In 1791, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant published his *Critique of Pure Reason* and brought Descartes' house crumbling down. Kant revived the Aristotelian view of knowledge being pure sensory input, and concluded that reality exists only within the mind of the individual; there is no reality with a capital 'R.'

All of this coincided with the growth of the quasi-Christian religion of Deism, with its distant God as the supreme Watchmaker, and natural laws replacing Providence. "Deism asserts the Divine existence, but with the fewest attributes possible."¹⁵ Cartesian Enlightenment thought was conducive to Deism, for otherwise the traditional view of God tended to get in the way of unfettered human reason. Miracles, for instance, deeply troubled such Enlightenment thinkers as Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson. Deistic philosophy removed God so far from the world, that post-Kantian thought could no longer find Him.

Enter Charles Darwin. Contrary to popular notions, Darwin did not invent the theory of Evolution, he merely popularized it. We have already noted that the ancient Greeks were largely devoted to some form of evolutionary thought or another, but that

¹⁵ Shedd; 156.

which has come to be known as Evolution in the modern sense was widely taught and believed in academic circles in the 18th Century. Charles' grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, presented one of the first formal theories on evolutionary thought in his *Zoonomia, or the Laws of Organic Life*, and the French biologist Jean Lamarck was perhaps the true 'father' of modern evolutionary theory. But Charles Darwin popularized the theory through his overseas travels, his careful analysis of biological observations, and – most of all – his widely popular treatise, *Origin of Species*, published in 1859.



Charles Darwin (1809-92)

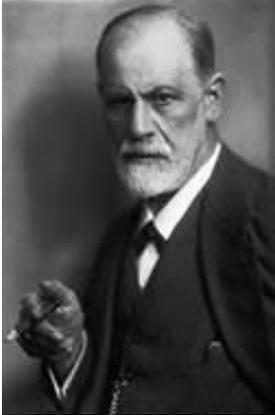
Darwin succeeded in bringing a materialistic worldview into the popular mainstream, and greatly contributed to the growing acceptance of atheism as a valid life perspective. He himself was raised in a Unitarian family and environment, so there was little Christian orthodoxy to preserve into his adult life. Darwin's world was still theistic, but dogmatism was on the wane, and many new cults and sects were arising within nominal Christianity. In the field of science, God was increasingly unwelcome, though no one had quite found the courage to show Him the door. "After Darwin's *Origin of Species*, God rapidly became redundant in the whole business."¹⁶

Darwin's work played the largest part in the eviction of God. The Darwinian hypothesis of natural selection explained two of the three great instances of divine activity in biology – the origin of species and the adaptation of animals and plants to their environments – without reference to God. The theory of natural selection was hardly impregnable, but it broke the magic spell. Darwin showed that, in the one large area of science where God still retained an active explanatory function, He was not needed after all. A purely naturalistic account of the central phenomena of natural history could be laid out in a scientifically credible way.¹⁷

Thus far the genealogy of modern thought; modern atheism. There is one more

¹⁶ Turner, James; 179.

¹⁷ *Idem*.



Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

actor to come on stage, however, whose work would broaden the attack on God and religion beyond the realm of science and bring it into the home. Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist who became the 'father of modern psychoanalysis,' took the idea of a belief in God from the merely unnecessary to the psychotic. Freud focused his analysis of patients on 'childhood psychoses,' and eventually came to attribute most mental disorders to some malfunction in the development of the patient during childhood.

It was no huge leap from Freudian 'Oedipus Complex' and the pervasive modern view (echoed by Bertrand Russell above) that religion is nothing more than the psychotic vestige of an overbearing parental influence. Nor would it be long after Freud that many Western nations would cease any reference or respect toward God or Christianity within public education, and apply increasing pressure against the 'indoctrination' of children in the religious views of the parents, even in their own home.

This brief survey of the evolution of unbelief, presents us with the backdrop against which the study of God and of theology must be placed. It does no good to hole up in an ivory tower citadel of learning, separate from and ignorant of the world in which all theological study is to be applied. But it is equally fruitless to fail to see the world for what it is; to delude oneself into believing human society to think one way, when in fact it is thinking in a manner diametrically opposite. Atheism is fashionable today; theism is not. Atheism will garner audiences; theism will not. Atheism marks the triumph and 'freedom' of mankind; theism reminds men of the thralldom of the Church. If one is to begin to speak theistically in the modern world, he must recognize that the world no longer understands the terms that he will be using, or at least no longer uses those terms in the same manner. The world now breathes an atmosphere of unbelief.

This reality impacts the study and application of theology in several ways. First, the theist (and especially the evangelical theist) must be prepared to be ignored and marginalized, patronized and ridiculed. At best his views will be regarded as 'quaint traditionalism,' or 'something that works for him;' at worst he will be castigated as a hater of men and of man's freedom from the bondage of religion. In between these two extremes there will be the majority opinion: theism has been disproven by science and, therefore, have no role in the public square. We have not progressed to the point where teaching the existence of God is forbidden from one generation to the next, but we have arrived at the point where it is so in public educational institutions.

Yet there are still many - according to most polls a majority - within Western society that say that they believe in God. Often it is the Christian God that is vaguely formed in their mind, though otherwise devoid of Christian doctrine or anything intelligent to say about that God. And that is where the rub comes for the evangelical theologian: *saying* something about God. Clearly this is the 'job' of the theologian, but it is no longer considered an acceptable topic of conversation in polite society. In other words, it is liable to land the theologian in a cauldron of boiling pitch. The post-modernist is free to believe in God or not to believe in God, and the one who believes, does so in the 'God' of his own imagination: "What God means to me." Modern Western society tolerates a vast plurality of opinions with regard to the existence or non-existence of God, and with regard to the attributes of that God is He should actually exist. What modern Western society does not tolerate is someone who speaks dogmatically as to both the existence of God and as to His attributes. For if there is but one God, and His nature has been revealed to Man, then all other views of 'God' are false, and that strikes at the very heart of post-modernism. It is intolerant to say that another's view of God - or view of a non-god - is *wrong*; and modern society will tolerate everything but intolerance.

The modern era is not entirely new, however. Indeed, it bears striking resemblance to the era of the Church's foundation, in which Christian monotheism had to do battle in the forum with pagan polytheism. Ironically, due to the fact that Christians worshiped one God - and an invisible God at that - they were often labeled as 'atheists.' The second

century is an instructive time to reflect upon when one considers how to 'do theology' in an atmosphere of unbelief, for the unbelief of modern atheism is of the same nature as the unbelief of paganism. The second century was the era of the 'apologists' - men like Justin Martyr and Tertullian who attempted to present the doctrines of Christianity, and of the Christian God, in a manner that could be understood within the prevailing pagan philosophy of the day. Their approach was modeled after that of the apostle Paul during his time in Athens, when he had opportunity to face off against the 'philosophers' on the Areopagus. Paul's method is still instructive today.

Paul's usual method of evangelism centered around the synagogues of the Diaspora: he would enter the synagogue on the Sabbath, and read from the scrolls as was the right of any visiting rabbi. Then he would expound the meaning of the passage and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the Jewish nation. But he was not bound by this method; one that would yield little fruit if employed amidst a gathering of Greek philosophers on Mars Hill. Implicit in Paul's actual approach in this situation, recorded in Acts 17, is the fact that the apostle read broadly, and was probably as conversant in Plato as he was in Moses.

This next statement will seem, at the very least, to be unorthodox (some might say, heretical). But the modern battleground is not for the human heart, it is for the human mind. This is a paradigm shift from evangelism and evangelical teaching from what it has been for the past two hundred years: a 'heart' religion. From the days of John Wesley through those of Charles Finney, Christianity in the United States focused to an ever-increasing extent upon the 'heart' of man, and upon his need for a new one through regeneration. True as this is, theoretically, we must return to the biblical teaching that regeneration is the work of God through the Holy Spirit, and not of man through rousing or reverent music and gripping or heart-rending testimonies. But in the process of the Church's shift toward the 'heart,' somewhere along the way the 'mind' got left behind. It is time to regain that ground; perhaps past time.

Therefore theological study must have a philosophical component, and in the great theological writings throughout Church history, it always has. A modern Western

evangelical, arguing from a 'realist' philosophical position (though he or she probably is unaware of this) will not connect with the atheist, agnostic, or 'spiritualist' who is coming from a 'nominalist' position (chances are that the unbeliever is also unaware of his or her philosophical perspective). The most effective approach, it would seem, would be that of the apostle on Mars Hill: to attack the issue at the point where all *thinking* humanity joins together, the search for *ultimate answers*. "The human quest for explanation inevitably and rightly seeks for the ultimate explanation of everything observable – that object or objects on which everything depends for its existence and properties...We will have to acknowledge *something* as ultimate – the great metaphysical issue is what that is."¹⁸ It is true that a large segment of modern human society is not *thinking*, but frankly such people will not be reached by any sort of message, at least not in any meaningful way. But it may safely be said that, at some point in their life, all humans face the *ultimate questions*; it is inevitable on the basis of the *imago Dei*, the image of God in which Man was created. The Preacher put it this way, "...He has set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even until the end."¹⁹

This is not a new approach to the study of theology, nor is it completely absent from modern theological writings. Especially within the Reformed tradition, there is a recognition of *philosophical* theology as a valid and necessary approach both to the study of God and of the application of that study in the public forum. With Paul the modern theologian must be more broadly read than just the Bible, even more than just Reformed authors. The modern theologian must build, by the grace and illumination of the Holy Spirit, his theological edifice to stand in the world in which he lives – not in an imaginary golden age of Christian thought some centuries ago. That means that theology today must come to grips with the roots and the fruits of post-modernism, to see the evolution of unbelief, and to be able to draw the mind of man back to the knowledge of the truth.

¹⁸ Swinburne; 39.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:11

That truth begins with the *ultimates*. In other words, the foundation of a reasonable and accurate world-and-life view begins with a system of thought best suited to answering the ultimate questions. Richard Swinburne, in his book *Is There A God?*, sets forth three possible philosophical paradigms from which a man can attempt to answer the 'ultimates' of life. Materialism, as we have seen, is one such paradigm. It is the prevailing thought pattern of our post-modern world. Although we defined it



Richard Swinburne (1934-)

earlier, it is so dominant in Western thought today that the definition warrants repeating,

What I mean here by *materialism* is the view that the personal and mental, though distinct from it, are fully caused by the physical; that the existence of persons, and their having the purposes, powers, and beliefs they do, has a full inanimate explanation.²⁰

The materialist seeks no further explanation of the phenomena of life and the universe beyond that which can be observed in the microscope or the telescope. Matter is ultimate, and to life's more pressing questions he responds with Macbeth,

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is **a tale**
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare; *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V)

Swinburne then describes what he calls a 'mixed theory,' one that is probably descriptive of the majority of Western society; he calls it *humanism*.

That the existence and operation of the factors involved in personal explanation cannot be explained fully in inanimate terms, and conversely, that the existence and operation of the factors involved in inanimate explanation cannot be explained fully in personal terms.²¹

²⁰ Swinburne; 40.

²¹ *Idem*.

This is a hybrid philosophy, a form of metaphysical agnosticism that holds that there must be something beyond mere 'matter' to give account for the things that happen within the realm of normal human observation and experience. The realm of Matter and the realm of Spirit are placed on equal footing in this paradigm, with neither exercising hegemony over the other. This view allows for a form of spiritualism that runs clear of dogmatic theism, yet gives the holder a self-satisfied feeling that all of the bases are covered. The humanist can be a scientist from Monday to Friday, a hedonist on Saturday, and even a Christian on Sunday. It all works within this jumble of inchoate thought and, as just stated, this is how most Westerners think today.

Finally Swinburne lists *theism* as the third philosophical option on which to build a *weltanschauung* – a worldview – that approaches to answering the ultimate questions.

The third possibility is that the existence and operation of the factors involved in inanimate explanation are themselves to be explained in personal terms, where persons include, not just human persons, but a personal being of a quite different kind, God...The thesis of this book is that theism provides by far the simplest explanation of all phenomena. Materialism is not, I shall argue, a simple hypothesis, and there is a range of phenomena which it is most unlikely ever to be able to explain. Humanism is an even less simple hypothesis than materialism.²²

Swinburne would not be regarded by many as a conservative evangelical theologian (he is a professor of Philosophy at Oxford), but his conclusion is also that of the current study. Nonetheless, as with Swinburne and with Paul, we will take note of the opposing views, recognizing that the vast majority of those with whom we come in contact will *not* be theists in the true sense of the term, but rather materialists or humanists.

Recommended Supplemental Reading (required for Certificate Program):

²² *Ibid.*; 41.

Existence & Attributes of God

Orr, James; *The Christian View of God and the World*; Lecture I. Online text available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/orr/view.v.html>.

Machen, J. Gresham; *The Importance of Christian Scholarship*. PDF text available at <http://www.monergism.com/search?keywords=Machen&format=All>.

Session 2 – The Miracle of Being

----- Unit 2a -----

Let us consider again the previous comment by Richard Swinburne concerning the universal quest of man for *explanations*:

The human quest for explanation inevitably and rightly seeks for the ultimate explanation of everything observable – that object or objects on which everything depends for its existence and properties...We will have to acknowledge *something* as ultimate – the great metaphysical issue is what that is.²³

As a bald statement of human philosophy it cannot be denied by the atheist, for his conclusion against the existence of a God derives precisely from his own quest for explanations. The evolutionist seeks to explain the processes of inter-specie mutation; the scientist seeks to explain the mathematical language of natural laws; the geneticist seeks to explain the biological sequences in the development of living organisms: all seek to *explain* and, within the boundaries of their worldview, seek to explain *ultimately*. But here Swinburne brings up the truly ultimate question: that of Being.

It is extraordinary that there should be anything at all. Surely the most natural state of affairs is simply nothing; no universe, no God, nothing. But there is something. And so many things. Maybe chance could have thrown up the odd electron, but so many particles!²⁴

There have been numerous philosophical formulae brought forward by theologians to ‘prove’ the existence of God, and we will have occasion to review the main ones in their turn. But the ultimate of ultimates has to be the question of Being: why is there *something* rather than *nothing*? What is the most reasonable explanation for this state of affairs? Of course, in postulating this question we are already making a major assumption – a presupposition: that the ‘something’ we sense and call the universe is *real*. Indeed, there are philosophies and religions in the world and through history, in which

²³ Swinburne; 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; 48.

'reality' is denied to those things that man perceives through his senses. Buddhism, for instance, denies the existence of the soul and the reality of man's sensory environment. Frankly, there is no intellectual argument that can be made against such self-deception. Perhaps this is an example of man becoming "*futile in his own speculations.*" (Rom. 1:21) In point of fact, no one who denies the reality of the world around him can actually live in accordance with that belief. He would knock himself out running into the first wall that he believed was not there, or would be quickly run over by the truck that did not exist. To the Buddhist, all life is suffering; but for the consistent Buddhist, that suffering would end very quickly. And as we cannot live as though the world around us were unreal, so also we cannot think unless we believe the perceptions and mental processes we employ are true.

Consequently our investigation cannot be as to whether the things we perceive in the world are real or not, for the mental processes that we employ in the investigation demand that we trust our perceptions to be real. We accept the world around us as real, because we cannot do otherwise. But why is it here? Why is Man here to ask the question? What is the *ultimate* explanation for there being anything rather than nothing?

Materialism Answers:

The materialist postulates that Matter is most real, and eternal: there was no beginning of Matter; it simply always has been. It is truly hard to understand how men of science can hold such a view, knowing as they do that Matter is, in and of itself, inert and impotent. Matter 'has mass and takes up space,' but is incapable of *doing* anything about that. At least it is apart from the effects of Energy. It is molecular energy that gives motion to the various phases of Matter, potential energy that offers the possibility of something happening involving Matter, and kinetic energy that enervates motion in the universe. The transfer of energy, invisible in its own action, is measurable in the effect upon Matter. Thus, if Matter were eternal, it would remain absolutely inert until the (miraculous) advent of Energy; it would be as if there was nothing, for nothing could possibly come of it.

So we take a step back in our search for ultimate Being, moving from Matter to Energy. Physicists tell us that the cumulative energy stored in the universe is progressively and constantly dissipating, and will eventually lose the capacity to do work. The universe will go cold and dark, and Matter will become inert, or in the language of Genesis, *tohu vabohu* - 'formless and void.' This theoretical scenario (called 'heat death') is based on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which involves the principle of Entropy - the measure of disorder in any system. The tendency of all Nature is toward greater disorder. Theoretically the universe 'began' with minimum entropy and will end with maximum entropy. Entropy can only be overcome through the addition and exercise of Energy.

We might conclude, therefore, that 'in the beginning' there was Energy, maximum Energy causing minimum Entropy. We might even say that there was *only* Energy; no Matter at all. This would be a situation not foreign to the biblical language, "*And God said, 'Let there be Light,' and there was Light.*" (Gen. 1:3) Nor would this theory be unscientific, for the current governing paradigm in physical science holds that Matter and Energy are convertible via the most famous equation in history: $E = mc^2$. But we actually thereby involve ourselves in an inescapable 'do loop' with regard to which came first, the Energy or the Matter. For all energy, as far as man has measured and studied it, has a source, and that source is most often matter. For instance, the light and heat energy that the Earth enjoys from the Sun, comes from the thermonuclear reaction of Hydrogen atoms in the depths of that star's great cauldron of fusion. But the gathering together of that matter to the point of critical mass, at which point spontaneous and chain reactive fusion could occur, itself required energy!

At this point the materialistic scientist simply stops: there was a 'time' when all Matter was concentrated in infinitesimal space, and then BANG!, Matter was blown radially outward into the ever-expanding universe, and so on and so forth. As for where the Matter came from, or the Energy that caused the big 'bang,' the materialist scientist answers, 'It is just how things were.' But this is not an *ultimate* answer by any stretch of the imagination, and the man who cannot conceive of the first cause of any series of

events, cannot trust his understanding of the chain of events that follow. Swinburne refutes the materialist who stops at this point by stating truly, "But that sort of stopping place is just where no rational enquirer will stop."²⁵ The man who stops where the materialist stops, does so not because of the overwhelming strength of his data, but because he simply does not want to go on, to go deeper or higher. He has reached the peak of Kilimanjaro, and chooses to pretend he stands atop Everest.

Humanism Answers:

In spite of the fact that most people in the world (or at least the 'Western' world) accept Evolution as having been scientifically proven as the process by which all things are, very few people are thorough-going materialists. That category of thought is a decidedly minority opinion at one fringe of the spectrum, with consistent theists occupying the other fringe. The mass of humanity lies somewhere in the middle, allowing 'scientific' explanations for the physical and biological processes of Nature, and 'spiritual' explanations for those things that science cannot explain.

One alternative to materialism is a mixed theory – that the existence and operation of the factors involved in personal explanation cannot be explained fully in inanimate terms, and, conversely, that the existence and operation of the factors in inanimate explanation cannot be explained fully in personal terms. Let us call this theory *humanism*.²⁶

This convoluted definition is basically saying that we cannot explain everything by using materialistic science (inanimate explanation), while also saying that science has indeed explained a great deal that mankind used to attribute to the workings of divine power (personal explanation). One wonders why Swinburne chose the name 'humanism' for this philosophy, for he does not explain (either inanimately or personally!) his choice of the word. And the word already has a great deal of baggage accumulated since the Renaissance. Nonetheless, the definition of this particular school of thought is valid, and prevalent in the world today: man accepts the advances of Science

²⁵ Swinburne; 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; 40.

as inroads to the ancient superstitions of Religion, yet still holds to the mysteries of soul and spirit as being beyond the ken of Science. It is an attempt to have the best of both epistemological worlds, but it is untenable.

The most cogent example of this philosophy is 'Theistic Evolution.' This theological/philosophical (and pseudo-scientific) genre arose as an attempt to synthesize evolutionary theory with the biblical notion of a Creator God. The general concept of Theistic Evolution is that God, as the Great First Cause, instituted the processes of evolution, by which life has progressively advanced through the vast ages of the Earth's existence. At root, Theistic Evolution is Deistical, though most theistic evolutionists are professing evangelicals. One such advocate offers this Abstract to his essay on Theistic Evolution:

Theistic evolution is the proposition that God is in charge of the biological process called evolution. God directs and guides the unfolding of life forms over millions of years. Theistic evolution contends that there is no conflict between science and the Biblical book of Genesis.²⁷

There are serious problems with Theistic Evolution, not the least of which is the fact that the view is unequivocally rejected by both Evolutionists and Creationists. As a hybrid philosophy – and this is true of *humanism* as Swinburne has defined it – it satisfies neither of its component philosophies, but denudes each of its logical content. It is an attempt, for instance, to insert the evolutionary process into the revelation of Scripture. But as such it completely ignores the biblical doctrines of sin and of its propagation through the human race, not to mention Christ and redemption. Its attempt to find a God in Darwinian Evolution is equally futile, for the heart and soul of the evolutionary process is arbitrary mutation in response/anticipation of environmental circumstances. There was no room for God in Darwin's theory, and there still is no room for God in modern Evolutionary Science: "...according to a 2003 Cornell survey of leading scientists in the

²⁷ <http://theistic-evolution.com/theisticevolution.html>

field of evolution, 87% deny existence of God, 88% disbelieve in life after death, and 90% reject idea that evolution directed toward 'ultimate purpose.'"²⁸

----- Unit 2b -----

The Ultimate Cop Out:

Before moving on to the theistic explanation of why things *are*, we ought to revisit the views of the man widely considered to be the patron saint (using that term purely figuratively) for modern social evolutionary thought: Herbert Spencer. Spencer was a British sociologist who famously applied Darwinian evolutionary theory to the study of human social development and structures. Spencer's promulgation of Social Darwinism would later be utilized in the field of Eugenics



Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)

– the practice of 'weeding out' branches of the human race deemed 'less advanced' through specific breeding and forced sterilization programs. But more to the point of our current study, Spencer, like Darwin, saw no need for a 'God' to explain any of his theories or conclusions, including those with regard to the origin of the universe. His syllogism is both illustrative of modern atheistic thought, and important for the believer to think through for himself.

Spencer held that there are only three possible explanations of the existence of the universe, and all three are untenable. The first is that of *self-existence*; the second is that of *self-creation*; and the third is that of *creation by an external agency*. Spencer rejects the first option thus,

Self-existence necessarily means existence without a beginning, and to form a conception of self-existence is to form a conception of existence without a beginning. Now by no mental effort can we do this. To conceive existence through infinite past-time implies the conception of infinite past-time, which is an impossibility.²⁹

²⁸ <http://www.discovery.org/a/10091>

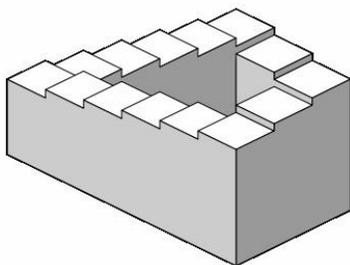
²⁹ Spencer, Herbert; *First Principles*, quoted by Herman Hoeksema in *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association; 1966); 30.

Spencer here acknowledges that all human understanding is predicated on, among other things, the concept of cause and effect: for every effect there must be a sufficient cause. Self-existence posits an ultimate effect for which there is no cause, and this is illogical and irrational. So Spencer moves on to the second explanatory option: *self-creation*.

The hypothesis of self-creation, which practically amounts to what is called Pantheism, is similarly incapable of being represented in thought...Really to conceive self-creation is to conceive potential existence passing into actual existence by some inherent necessity, which we cannot do...For whence potential existence? This would just as much require accounting for as actual existence; and just the same difficulties would meet us.³⁰

Again, Spencer argues logically in a manner that would be hard for modern materialists to refute, and properly dismisses the notion of the universe having been self-generated: a *potential* universe passing into an *actual* universe provides no real explanation either of the process, or where the potentiality came from to begin with. So far Spencer seems to be moving in the inexorable direction of an external agency, what some would today call 'intelligent design.' And this is indeed his third option, but he rejects that one, as well as the first two.

Spencer argues cogently that the existence of that power, energy, or being that initiated the origin of the universe, itself must be explained. And the same three explanatory options present themselves for the solution of this conundrum as he began



with. "Those who cannot conceive a self-existent universe, and who therefore assume a creator as the source of the universe, take for granted that they can conceive a self-existent creator."³¹ But, Spencer argues, if self-existence is illogical and irrational

³⁰ *Ibid.*; 30-31.

³¹ *Ibid.*; 34.

when applied to the material of the universe, it must also be

so when applied to a creator of that material. Thus he concludes,

Whoever agrees that the atheistic hypothesis is untenable because it involves the impossible idea of self-existence, must perforce admit that the theistic hypothesis is untenable if it contains the same impossible idea.³²

This is admittedly a powerful argument - cogent and rational - and it has convinced many. But in actuality it *cannot* convince anyone of anything, for it concludes *absolutely nothing*. It is like the optical illusion of the stairwell that has no beginning and no end: an interesting mental exercise, but to no value. Spencer's selection of atheism is not by way of an explanation for the existence of the universe, but by way of default: he concludes that because man cannot logically conceive of a syllogism that explains the existence of the universe, there must be no God. That is a non sequitur. The logical conclusion to Spencer's train of thought *should* be that the origin of the universe is incomprehensible to man and to human logic, but not that God cannot exist. Yet we do not have to end where Spencer ends; for there is a major difference between self-existent matter and a self-existent creator that he overlooks entirely. The former is inanimate and impersonal; the latter is both alive and a Person. It is only fair to man's rational nature to continue investigating the conundrum, and not stop with the blanket affirmation of atheism furnished by Herbert Spencer.

----- Unit 2c -----

Substantial & Personal:

It is not incumbent upon the theologian or the philosopher to rationally prove the existence of God, but merely to show that such existence is not irrational. We will have occasion to show that the existence of a divine being - an uncreated Creator and self-existent Being - of necessity cannot lie within the rational comprehension of finite beings.

³² *Idem.*

For now, however, we will take Spencer's syllogism as a point of departure, acknowledging the validity of his argumentation to the point where he quits, and illogically concludes in favor of atheism.

To deny the reality of Being is irrational, but so also is any rational exercise directed to non-being. W. G. T. Shedd writes, "Knowledge, speaking generally, is the cognition of entity. Nonentity cannot be the subject matter of human investigation."³³ Therefore, what we have reached in our discussion thus far with regard to the reality of Being is not the limits of human rational thought, but the limits of human scientific enquiry. Ultimately this is why the materialist/evolutionist does, in fact, stop here: he cannot conceive of knowledge beyond that which comes through empirical science. But Shedd is correct when he writes, "It is impossible to explain either the origin or the perpetuity of things by physical science."³⁴ But *things* exist, so there must be another path of explanation; perhaps not rational in the scientific sense of the term, but certainly neither irrational.

The key at this point is to ask what can be said about the 'uncreated Creator' or the 'self-existent Being' with whom we end Spencer's mental journey. It remains for our next lesson to discuss how it is that we can say *anything* about such a Being once we acknowledge that nothing can be said in that regard by means of empirical science. That topic will be 'revelation': the *self*-disclosure of the Being with whom we have to do. But it is the topic of this lesson to study the reality of Being, and to seek to explain that Being in terms that, while perhaps not rigorously rational, are at least not irrational. Rationally we must conclude that because *things* exist they must have had a beginning and a cause. Accepting the reality of such a cause, we then seek to say as little as we both may and must regarding that cause in order that we may further our journey to the origins of things. Reconsider, therefore, Swinburne's comment with regard to the innate rationalism of all mankind,

³³ Shedd; *Dogmatic Theology*; 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; 41.

The human quest for explanation inevitably and rightly seeks for the ultimate explanation of everything observable – that object or objects on which everything depends for its existence and properties...**We will have to acknowledge something as ultimate** – the great metaphysical issue is what that is.³⁵

To this we add the much earlier words of Charnock: “We must come to something that is first in every kind, and this first must have a cause, not of the same kind, but infinite and independent; otherwise men run into inconceivable labyrinths and contradictions.”³⁶ In the tradition of Charnock, William G. T. Shedd offers perhaps the most succinct categorization of what we may say about this Being from whom all being arises,

There are *two predicates* which are of fundamental importance in determining the idea of God as a spirit: 1. Substantiality; God is an essence or substance. 2. Personality; God is a self-conscious being.³⁷

The simplicity of Shedd’s analysis is rationally attractive, and his twofold predication of Substantiality and Personality has been affirmed and borrowed by many Reformed theologians since his time. The first, **Substantiality**, is just the philosophical way of saying that we can say something about God – He *is* something about which we can speak. This goes back to Shedd’s comment above, about not being able to know anything about non-entity. Similar is the comment by Charnock: “If there be not a God, it is impossible that there can be one,”³⁸ which, if one thinks about it long enough, will cause serious mental pain. More comprehensible is the thought that God is a substantial Being, and not merely an Idea about which nothing can be predicated. God is entity, and we can assign attributes to things that exist. What these attributes are, however, must come later and from a source that is trustworthy. Suffice it to say here that the source of

³⁵ Swinburne; 39, emphasis added.

³⁶ Charnock; 45.

³⁷ Shedd; 158.

³⁸ Charnock; 26.

the knowledge of the divine attributes will not, and cannot, flow from within human reason; the mind of the finite will not plumb the depths of the Infinite.

We remember here that our governing question is 'How came there to be *something* rather than *nothing*?' We have seen that the reality of things is undeniable on any level, be it philosophical, psychological, or scientific. In addition, it is inconceivable to rational thought that *something* should derive from *nothing*, requiring us to believe that the ultimate explanation of Being must itself 'Be.' The only alternative – and this is what modern evolutionary materialists offer – is silence; no answer at all. But Shedd is undoubtedly correct when he writes, "It is impossible to explain either the origin or the perpetuity of things by physical silence."³⁹ It is important to keep in mind that materialism does not posit an answer over against theism; rather it maintains absolute silence when all that is in man demands an answer.

The Substantiality of God is metaphysically necessary due to the existence of the universe, the 'thingness' of the universe which philosophers call *quiddity*⁴⁰; for that which has being either has it through the agency of something else, or through itself. It is rationally untenable that anything should derive existence or being from itself if it did not exist prior to itself. The universe of matter and energy, therefore, could not have derived being from itself unless it existed prior to itself, which is an absurdity. There must be a Being whose existence is necessarily true of itself, and underived from another; otherwise being itself would be impossible, which is also an absurdity. Thus Thomas Aquinas asserts that God's essence is His being,

Every thing, furthermore, exists because it has being. A thing whose essence is not its being, consequently, is not through its essence but by participation in something, namely, being itself. But that which is through participation in something cannot be the first thing, because prior to it is the being in which it participates in order

³⁹ Shedd; 41.

⁴⁰ "The quality that makes a thing what it is" - <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/quiddity>.

to be. But God is the first being, with nothing prior to Him.. His essence is, therefore, His being.⁴¹

Hard though this may be to understand (and one usually has to read Aquinas two or three times, at least, to begin to understand what he is saying), it remains true and relatively easy of comprehension that, without a Being who necessarily exists, there could be no contingent existence, no universe at all. “When, therefore, we say that there is a God, we do not assert merely that there is in our minds the idea of an infinite Spirit; but that, entirely independent of our idea of Him, such a Being really exists.”⁴² The divine property of Substantiality, therefore, simply states that since the universe has being or substance, it must have derived from a Being that also is Substantial; in other and simpler words: God exists.⁴³ “If there is any being at all, there must be eternal, unchangeable, necessary being. If there is any existence, there must be self-existence to explain it.”⁴⁴

To self-existence we must add **Personality**, for that which merely exists does not necessitate the existence of any other thing, with which fact we are trying to grapple. If all we had were Substantiality, we would have no necessary path to the existence of anything else but the Substantial One, the self-existent Being: God, who is self-satisfied and self-sufficient, would be all that there is. “God is a universe in himself, whether the world exist or not.”⁴⁵ The fact that there exists a universe ‘beyond’ God, external to Himself and distinguishable from Him, presupposes its creation by God, and that in turn implies purpose and will. Now it must be clearly stated that the term ‘personal’ as it is applied philosophically and theologically to God, is not the emotional, subjective ‘having a personal relationship with God’ type of meaning at all. Like so many terms involved

⁴¹ Aquinas, Thomas *Summa Contra Gentiles; Book One, God*; translated by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; 2003); 120-121.

⁴² Hodge, Charles; *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Hendrickson Publishers; 2001); 368.

⁴³ At this point one might agree with the English philosopher Bertrand Russell, “The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.”

⁴⁴ Thornwell, James Henley; *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell: Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1974); 58.

⁴⁵ Müller, Julius; *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*; I.14.

in the study of theology, this word has a philosophical meaning that is deeper than the 'interpersonal' sense, yet undergirds it.

By 'personal' the theologian means that God is not only a self-existent Being, but that He is also self-conscious, He is aware of Himself and of His own intellect and will. "This means that God is not mere force or energy or existent 'substance.' God is personal. Personality requires two basic characteristics: self-reflection and self-determination. In other words, God is personal in that he knows himself to be (he is self-conscious) and he possesses the characteristics of self-determination (he 'thinks' and 'acts')." ⁴⁶

The Substantiality of God explains the reality of being: things exist because of a self-existent Being from whom (or 'which') all other beings derive their ultimate cause. This answers the 'What?' of the Universe, or at least inasmuch as the question 'Why Something Rather than Nothing' can be answered. But it does not answer the 'Why?' Substantiality leaves us with a First Cause, but without a First Purpose; this is an unsatisfactory place to remain. Even in our own experience, we find that once the 'what' of something has been explained to us, we normally respond with 'Okay, why?' It is beyond questioning that the universe possesses significant aspects of *design*, and that many characteristics of the universe seem to signify *purpose*. While the bare power of origination requires only an Original Being, the purpose of the expanse and continuation of that origination requires more. It requires a Being with self-determination, with intelligence and will, with purpose.

Another facet of reality that demands that the Ultimate Being possess Personality is the presence of personality among many of the lesser beings in the universe, not least of which is Man, who alone among the creatures of the earth possesses self-consciousness. This characteristic of the human psyche is far more significant, perhaps even miraculous, than is often considered: that man can not only think, but is aware of his own thinking and is able to pass, as it were, third-party judgment upon his own thoughts.

⁴⁶ Sire, James W.; *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic; 2004); 26-27.

The human spirit, in the act of self-cognition, furnishes both the subject that perceives, and the object that is perceived. The soul duplicates its own unity, as it were, and sets itself to look at itself. It is this power which the rational spirit possesses of making itself its own object, that constitutes it a *personal* being.⁴⁷

Surely such a phenomenon, undeniable to all observation, demands a greater and more cogent explanation than that of neural chemistry. "Self-consciousness is more mysterious and inexplicable than mere consciousness. It has been the problem of the philosophic mind in all ages."⁴⁸ James P. Boyce writes,

Guided by the analogy of our own natures we expect to find in him a personal, conscious, intelligent, and moral being, and this expectation is confirmed by the manifestations of his presence, and operations in the universe...Analogy does not furnish proof, but only probability; in some instances only possibilities. It does not show what God is, but what he may be. That which is suggested is confirmed or denied by other sources of knowledge. But we are so far taught through its aid that God must either be a Spirit, such as we are, or that he must have a higher nature to which belong all those attributes of spirit which constitute conscious personality and intelligent purpose.⁴⁹

It is unlikely that we will arrive at the full explanation of the mystery of self-consciousness, but it does stand to reason that the contention that self-consciousness arose arbitrarily from mere consciousness by processes of molecular evolution, is seriously lacking in explanatory power. Once again we find a saner, and simpler, explanation in the fact that Man is a self-conscious being because he was created by a Self-conscious Being, the former in the latter's image. Although this would take us far ahead of ourselves in the study, the phenomenon of self-consciousness in the Godhead lies at the very foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The evidence of the Personality of God, characterized by both self-consciousness and self-determination, will become clearer as we investigate the various *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. Those are the arguments founded on what we observe in the universe: the evidence of Design, for instance, and of Purpose. The logic

⁴⁷ Shedd; 183.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; 181.

⁴⁹ Boyce, James Pettigrew; *Abstract of Theology* (Escondito, CA: Dulk Christian Foundation; n.d.); 9.

is simple and irrefutable: that which bears evidence of Design and Purpose must either be a chimera (as maintained by the materialist) or it must have been designed by some intelligent being, and that for a purpose. Because the latter explanation is far more rational, and far more natural, it demands our acceptance.

We conclude our study of the question of being with the only simple (and hence 'scientific') explanation possible: that there exists an infinite and self-existent Being who possesses true Substantiality (which is to say, *real* existence as opposed to merely *ideal*) and Personality. All things exist because He exists; all things have their being as derivative from Him who is Being itself. And all things have come into being according to the design and for the purpose of Him who brought them into being.

Recommended Supplemental Reading (required for Certificate Program):

Gill, John, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity: Book 1, Chapter 1: "On the Being of God"* online at http://www.pbministries.org/books/gill/Doctrinal_Divinity/Book_1/index.htm.

Watson, Thomas; *A Body of Divinity: Chapter 3, The Being of God*; text available online at http://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/watson/wsc_wa_004_a.html.

Session 3 – Arguments for the Existence of God

----- Unit 3a -----

The Idea of God Innate:

Philosophers from the time of the ancient Greeks, three hundred years before Christ, have sought to devise logical syllogisms from which to prove the existence of a divine being. The triumvirate of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle furnished philosophical material to be ruminated, debated, modified, and maligned by countless generations of theologians and philosophers from their day to ours. Yet underlying all of this mental exercise is the question, “Does the existence of God need to be proven?” Indeed, is the existence of God capable of rational proof, or is it an innate concept within the very mind and soul of man? Alongside the various ‘proofs’ has always stood the idea – maintained by philosophers and theologians no less insightful and intelligent than the Big Three of the Greeks – that the existence of God is *self-evident*, both incapable of and independent of rational proof.

The great 13th Century theologian Thomas Aquinas defines ‘self-evident’ as follows: “Those propositions are said to be self-evident that are known immediately upon the knowledge of their terms.”⁵⁰ The question, in application to the concept of a supreme Being called ‘God,’ becomes then, “When the term ‘God’ is used, is the content of that term immediately and innately known?” Aquinas, along with many others both before and after him, answers in the affirmative.

The proposition *God exists* is of this sort. For by the name *God* we understand something than which a greater cannot be thought. This notion is formed in the intellect by one who hears and understands the name *God*. As a result, God must exist already at least in the intellect. But He cannot exist solely in the intellect, since that which exists both in the intellect and in reality is greater than that which exists in the intellect alone. Now, as the very definition of the name points out, nothing can be greater than God. Consequently, the proposition that God exists is self-evident, as being evident from the very meaning of the name *God*.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Aquinas, Thomas; *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book 1* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; 2003); 79.

⁵¹ *Idem*.

Yet Aquinas, powerfully influenced as he was by ‘the Philosopher,’ Aristotle, could not help but put this argument into a logical, syllogistic form! In other words, he argued for the existence of God being self-evident, though that which is self-evident requires no argument for its veracity. More significant, then, than the arguments of Aquinas for the innate knowledge of God is the fact that the self-revelation of God – the Bible – nowhere sets forth anything remotely resembling a syllogism or proof of the divine existence.⁵² Shedd cogently points out that the Scriptures could not possibly engage in a logical discourse upon the existence of God, since the existence of God is more innate and self-evident than any premise that could be formulated in support of it.

The reason why the Scriptures make no provision against speculative atheism by syllogistic reasoning is, that syllogistic reasoning starts from a premise that is more obvious and certain than the conclusion drawn from it, and they do not concede that any premise necessary to be laid down in order to draw the conclusion that there is a Supreme Being, is more intuitively certain than the conclusion itself.⁵³

Jan Jacob van Oosterzee adds,

All proving therefore consists in an appeal to a higher truth, which forms the solid basis for that which must be established by this very appeal. To prove the existence of God would thus, properly speaking, be to bring forward the ground for God’s existence. But precisely because He is the most perfect, absolute Being, God has the ground of His existence not outside of or above Him, but in Himself alone; He is because He is, and cannot possibly not be.⁵⁴

Thus the Bible begins with the simple statement, “*In the beginning, God...*” and the Apostle Paul spends no time whatsoever attempting to convince the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill of the existence of the ‘Unknown God’ whom they worshipped in ignorance. From beginning to end, God is presupposed. Indeed, His existence is *the* premise for all logical conclusions drawn from Holy Writ. Furthermore, Scripture admits

⁵² Shedd; 195.

⁵³ *Ibid.*; 196.

⁵⁴ Van Oosterzee, J. J.; *Christian Dogmatics* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1891); 239-240.

of no real atheism, but rather that all men are aware *innately* of the existence (and power, and justice, etc.) of God, though they suppress that knowledge in unbelief.

The unity, invisibility, omnipotence, eternity, retributive justice, and benevolence of the Divine being are represented by St. Paul as knowable by man as man, and as actually known by him in greater or less degree.⁵⁵

The innate knowledge of God manifests itself most powerfully in the very act of human *thought*, which is metaphysically inconceivable apart from an *a priori* existence of One in whom thought is supreme and perfect. Scripturally this is the principle of the Logos, who is the "*Light that comes into the world, enlightening every man*" (John 1:9). Aquinas develops this thought by way of analogy, "For just as the light of the sun is the principle of all visible perception, so the divine light is the principle of all intelligible knowledge, since the divine light is that in which intelligible illumination is found first and in its highest degree."⁵⁶

The concept of the divine being as *innate* within human consciousness flows biblically from the doctrine of Man having been created in the image of God. This means that the knowledge of God is inherent in the basic framework of the human mind, "An 'innate' idea is one that results from the constitution of the mind."⁵⁷ The proposition that the idea of God is innate within the human mind, means that any attempt to 'prove' the divine existence must utilize faculties that are themselves evidence of the divine existence – human rational thought.

The objects of sense themselves would make no *conscious* impression, if there were not five senses in man upon which to impress themselves. They make no conscious impression upon a rock. In like manner, the order, design, and unity of external nature would not suggest the idea of a Supreme being, if that idea were not subjective to man." Unless education and culture were preceded by an innate consciousness of God, as an operative predisposition, there would be nothing for education and culture to work upon.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; 197. Cp. Romans 1:19-23.

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Gentiles*; 80.

⁵⁷ Shedd; 198.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; 199.

It appears that the primitive Christian Church rested upon the proposition that the knowledge of God was innate, as it saw no need for many generations to attempt any 'proof' thereof. In some measure this phenomenon is attributable to the nature of the audience – the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world – before which the Early Church presented the Gospel. For the first several centuries of the Church, the 'fathers' "held that the idea of God is inborn in man, and that man can not liberate himself from it, however much he would like to do so."⁵⁹ Thus it is significant to the current question to see how it came about within Christian theological writings, to develop logical syllogisms for the proof of the existence of what had thus far been considered *innate*.

The first Church Father to seriously develop a logical form of argumentation toward the existence of God, was Athanasius, 4th Century 'Father of Orthodoxy' against the Arian heresy. His argumentation was crude in comparison to the refined syllogisms developed by later theologians and philosophers, and basically followed the same line of thinking as presented by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. That is, that creation itself supplies ample rational evidence for the existence of God, leaving man without excuse and atheism untenable. Athanasius' purpose was to refute the teachings of the Epicureans, an ancient form of materialism that denied the existence of spirit or divinity. The example of Athanasius will repeat itself throughout the rest of history to the current era: the use of 'arguments' for the existence of God has almost invariably arisen from an apologetical attempt to refute the gainsayer, to tear down the various atheistic philosophies that have held sway throughout the ages. The effectiveness of these arguments, therefore, should not be judged in light of the inherent knowledge that man has of God, but rather on the basis of whether they offer a meaningful refutation to the mental gymnastics of the atheist, in whatever form presented. Within the context of their apologetical value, we will analyze the arguments at the end of this lesson.

----- Unit 3b -----

⁵⁹ Hahn, Aaron; *History of the Arguments for the Existence of God* (Provo, UT: Repressed Publishing, LLC; 2014); 183.

Arguments for the Existence of God – *a priori*:

The philosophical and rational arguments for the existence of God are divided into two categories: the *a priori* arguments and the *a posteriori* arguments. The first, from the Latin meaning ‘from the earlier,’ argues inductively from the cause to the effect, whereas an *a posteriori* – ‘from the latter’ - argues deductively from the effect back to the cause. The distinction cannot be forced, however, when it pertains to arguments for the existence of God, since all such reasoning *of necessity* must work from what is observable backward – as there is nothing before God, and Man is definitely after Him. The better way to view the arguments, though roughly along the same lines, divides them between *inductive* and *deductive* reasoning – the former being more abstract, the latter rising from observable perceptions in the universe.

Within this broad categorization of the arguments there are many individual syllogisms that have been proposed by countless theologians and philosophers over the past three millennia. Most of them overlap and are restatements of earlier arguments. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) famously issued five arguments for the existence of God in his opus magnum, *Summa Theologica*: the Proof from Motion; from Efficient Cause; from Necessary versus Possible Being; from Degrees of Perfection; and from Design. The basic premise of each of these, and many others too numerous to summarize here, is that the observations man makes in the universe of experience must have some prior cause, independent of the series of causes that have brought the universe to where it is now observed. Therefore, movement presupposes an Unmoved Mover; Design implies a Supreme Architect; Quality argues for Absolute Perfection, etc. There are really only two arguments, therefore, from which all others flow: the *Ontological* and the *Cosmological*. However, for the sake of a balanced treatment of the history of the debate, we will review, in addition to these two, two other *a posteriori* or *deductive* proofs, the *Teleological* and the *Moral*.

The *Ontological* Argument for the Existence of God:

This proof of the divine existence was made famous by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109) in his two works, *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. Anselm opens the first of these two treatises with the basic premise of all such argumentation, that the existence of God can be reasonably ascertained by any man, of even moderate intelligence, apart from the activity of faith.

If anyone does not know, either because he has not heard or because he does not believe, that there is one nature, supreme among all existing things, who alone is self-sufficient in his eternal happiness, who through his omnipotent goodness grants and brings it about that all other things exist or have any sort of well-being, and a great many other things that we must believe about God or his creation, I think he could at least convince himself of most of these things by reason alone, if he is even moderately intelligent.⁶⁰

Anselm's Ontological Argument follows logically on our previous lesson, for it focuses on the reality of being, and on the rational necessity of a Being, greater than which we cannot conceive. The Archbishop's syllogism is fairly easy to follow: (1) We can conceive of a Being greater than which there is none. (2) If this Being existed only in our thoughts, then it would be possible to conceive of a greater: one that existed *in reality* as well as *in thought*. (3) Therefore, a Being than which none greater can conceive must exist in reality; that One we call God. "A being, which is not merely in the intellect, but in the external reality of such a nature than no other one can be thought of as higher, more absolute and more perfect, is God. Being the most perfect, god can not be thought of otherwise than existing in reality."⁶¹

Anselm's conclusion does presuppose as innate the thought that *real* existence is greater than *ideal* or *intellectual* existence, but this is an assumption that most people would grant. Both the strength and the weakness of the Anselmic argument is that it depends on the faculty of human thought as the foundation for the proof of God's existence. Some have argued against Anselm, that man can imagine a great many things that do not exist; therefore, the fact that man can imagine a 'greater than which there is

⁶⁰ http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works.iii.i.html.

⁶¹ Hahn; 70.

none' does not prove the existence of that Being. In response, advocates of Anselmian logic argue that there is a fundamental difference – in *kind* and not merely in *degree* – between the thought of God and the thought of anything else. God is a *necessary* being, not a *contingent* one: His existence is an essential component of any man's conception of Him. One author puts it thus,

He who rejects the belief of the Divine Existence conceives, nevertheless, of a Being to whom a superior cannot be conceived. Only he affirms that this Being does not exist. But by this affirmation he contradicts himself, inasmuch as that Being to whom he attributes all these perfections, yet to whom he at the same time denies existence, is found to be inferior to another being, who, to all his other perfections, joins that of existence.⁶²

Rene Descartes was an advocate of the Anselmian Ontological Argument, though he developed his own particular syllogism

Descartes' argument was in this form. We have the idea of an infinitely perfect Being. As we are finite, that idea could not have originated with us. As we are conversant only with the finite, it could not have originated from anything around us. It must, therefore, have come from God, whose existence is thus a necessary assumption.⁶³

Hodge's summary of the Cartesian form of the Anselmian proof strikes close to the heart of the matter: *how is it possible for a finite creature such as man, to conceive of an infinite being such as God?* The materialist consistently protests that the idea of God was developed in response to human ignorance and fear. But that begs the question. One need not even focus on the existence of God; one might apply the same logic to the concept of infinity in mathematics. Indeed, the very *words* 'infinite' and 'eternal' are incomprehensible if they originate from within the minds of finite and temporal beings, as all men are. The only logical and rational answer must be that of the Preacher, "*God has set eternity in the heart of every man...*" (Eccl. 3:11). Therefore, while the thought of many things might be purely fictitious and have no correspondent in real existence, the thought of an eternal, infinite, perfect God is not so.

⁶² Quoted in Shedd; 231.

⁶³ Hodge, Charles; *Systematic Theology: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; 2001); 205.

If the idea of God were not innate in man, and if man were not constitutionally religious, the grossest ignorance could not have brought him to the consciousness of God. All the ignorance in the world could not have prevailed upon man to believe in God, had he not been organized to that effect. The animals are ignorant enough, and yet they have never arrived at the idea of God.⁶⁴

The opponent of the Ontological Argument claims that the syllogism is like the



Rabbi Aaron Hahn

phrase from the movie *Field of Dreams*, “If you build it, they will come.” Instead, Anselm gives us “If you think it, it must be.” But the proper response to this attack is to rationally discuss just *where* it is any particular thought must come from. Descartes’ reasoning, therefore, is sound: thoughts must either come from without, or must be produced within, or must be innate.

All our ideas we derive either from without, or we have produced them ourselves, or they are inborn in us. Now, the idea of God as the most perfect Being can not be derived from without, for God is no object of a sensuous apprehension; nor can it be produced by man himself, for the more perfection there is in an idea, the more perfection there must be in the cause that produces it. Man, a finite being, can not be the cause of the conception of the most perfect and infinite Being, consequently the idea of God must be innate in man and implanted in his mind by the Supreme Being himself.⁶⁵

The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God has, as earlier noted, been the most maligned among the rational proofs. Yet it lives on from generation to generation, under new formulations that are really just repackaging of the old. It is most comprehensible, and perhaps most valuable, when one boils it down to this question addressed by Descartes: *Can* man even conceive of a God if such a Being did not exist and make His existence known innately within the human mind? When put this way, it at

⁶⁴ Quoted in Hahn; 12.

⁶⁵ Hahn, 73.

least becomes clearer why Anselm's argument has always had more sway among believers than among Rationalists and Materialists.

The *Cosmological* Argument for the Existence of God:

The second *a priori* or *inductive* argument for the divine existence is, really, a derivative of the first. It is also technically an *a posteriori* argument, since it argues from the Effect back to an original Cause. Still, the Cosmological Argument is more inductive and abstract than those that follow, and we therefore place it alongside the Ontological as an *a priori* proof. The argument's name derives from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means 'order' (as opposed to 'chaos'). The argument is simple, and for most people rationally air-tight: (1) The universe of effects that Man observes must each have an effective cause; (2) An infinite string of cause-effect relationships, without an initial cause, is incomprehensible; (3) Therefore, there must exist an Uncaused First Cause, from which all subsequent effects and causes derive; this Uncaused Cause we call God.

The theistical argument is, that the world is an effect; that it has not the cause of existence in itself, that it is not eternal, and therefore we are necessitated to assume the existence of a great First Cause to whose efficiency the existence of the universe is to be referred.⁶⁶

For, if the world and motion have a first beginning, some cause must clearly be posited to account for this origin of the world and of motion. That which comes to be anew must take its origin from some innovating cause; since nothing brings itself from potency to act, or from non-being to being...Now, if there were an infinite regress among efficient causes, no cause would be first. Therefore, all the other causes, which are indeterminate, will be suppressed. But this is manifestly false. We must, therefore, posit that there exists a first efficient cause. This is God.⁶⁷

An infinite succession, therefore, of merely dependent beings, without any original independent cause, is a series of beings that has neither necessity nor cause, nor any reason or ground at all for its existence, either within itself or from without.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Hodge; 210-211.

⁶⁷ Aquinas; *Summa Gentiles*; 94-95.

⁶⁸ Dr. Samuel Clarke, quoted in Hahn; 30.

This latter quote brings us to the crux of the Cosmological Argument: the distinction between *contingent* and *necessary* beings. A contingent being is one that need not be, and might not have been except that it is. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines a contingent being or entity as “a being such that if it exists it could have not-existed or could cease to exist.”⁶⁹ Man is a contingent being, as is the universe itself. It is conceivable that Man might not exist, or might cease to exist; the same is conceivable for the universe. But if a contingent being exists, there must have been a cause, perhaps itself contingent and so itself dependent upon a prior cause, and so on and so forth. But since contingent beings might either not be, or cease to be, they cannot provide the explanation for the existence either of themselves or of other contingent beings. “Contingent beings alone cannot provide an adequate causal account or explanation for the existence of a contingent being.”⁷⁰ Therefore we must rationally assume a prior *necessary* cause to which all subsequent causes and effects are due.

The term ‘necessary,’ when used in this philosophical sense, means that which cannot *not* be. “Necessity, as a logical term, denotes so firm a connection between the subject and predicate, that it is impossible that they should be separated.”⁷¹

And by “a necessary being” the cosmological argument means “a *logically* necessary being,” i.e. “a being whose non-existence is inconceivable in the sort of way that a triangle's having four sides is inconceivable”....Now since “necessary” is a word which applies primarily to propositions, we shall have to interpret “God is a necessary being” as “The proposition ‘God exists’ is logically necessary.”⁷²

An example of such a relationship between subject and predicate is the statement: “Man is human,” or the rhetorical question, “Is the Pope Catholic?” There is a *necessary* relationship between a man and humanity, and between the pope and

⁶⁹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument/#3.1>

⁷⁰ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument/#3.1>.

⁷¹ Shedd; 228.

⁷² <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument/#3.5>.



James P. Boyce (1827-1880)

Catholicism (though there may be some doubt on that latter point, in light of the current pontiff). Thus the Cosmological Argument is really very consonant with the scientific method, along these lines of contingency and necessity. The scientist observes an effect, and assumes a cause. The doctor observes a symptom, and searches for a disease. The entire pursuit of science over the centuries has been a journey up the line of contingent effect to contingent cause. 19th Century Baptist

theologian, James Boyce notes,

Indeed, one of the most important branches of scientific inquiry is into the unknown causes of existing phenomenon, which, without experience, we know must be effects of adequate causes. Thus Geology leads to inquire into the cause of the original stratification in the rocks, the existence of fossil remains, and the phenomena connected with the upheavals of rocks. So Astronomy presents its problems about the perturbations of the planets, the movements of stars and their disappearances, the spots upon the sun, and the ragged volcanic conditions of the moon...⁷³

But ultimately, logically and rationally, there must be something *necessary* in order for anything *contingent* to actually be. This takes us back to the discussion of Session 2, that it is easier to explain the non-existence of everything, than it is to explain the existence of anything. This is especially true when one realizes that the entire universe of perception and experience *might not have been* and *might someday not be* – it is contingent. Since a contingent being might not have been, it is the simpler explanation that it never comes to be. But we cannot deny that that which we perceive *is* and has most assuredly come into being. This requires a *necessary* Being as the First Cause; this requires God.

Above all changeable causes there must be an eternal, unchangeable cause; above all dead rules and laws there must be a pulse of life; above all finite aims there must be an ultimate, eternal, highest aim.⁷⁴

⁷³ Boyce, James P.; *Abstract of Theology* (Escondito, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation; 1887, reprint); 26-27.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Hahn; 42.

Both the arguments discussed thus far are primarily inductive in nature: they argue from a principle to a conclusion. Of course they both start with the reality of being, of actual effects that logically require sufficient causes. In this sense they are deductive and *a posteriori*. But their inductive nature, their *a priori* characteristic, arises from the fact that they do not analyze the nature of the 'being' or the 'effects' encountered; they simply acknowledge their existence and from that fact seek to derive an adequate explanation. Materialistic atheism offers no explanation whatsoever. Theism presents in these arguments a rational and simple explanation adequate to explain the phenomena observed and considered. As Richard Swinburne argues, "...the prior probability of a simple God exceeds that of a complex universe. Hence, if anything is to occur unexplained, it would be God, not the universe."⁷⁵

----- Unit 3c -----

Arguments for the Existence of God - *a posteriori*:

We turn now to two examples of the *a posteriori* or *deductive* arguments for the existence of God. This category of proof argues from perceptible evidence to an underlying original cause or ground for this evidence. The first example is the *Teleological Argument*, arguing from the evidence of design or purpose to the existence of a Designer. The second is the *Moral Argument*, which reasons that the evidence of morality and law presupposes a Supreme Good and Lawgiver. It is to be admitted up front that neither of these arguments has held much sway with materialists, and the current atmosphere of Post-modernism does not help much, either.

Teleological Argument: *The Evidence of Design & Purpose*:

This particular proof for the existence of God derives its name from the Greek *teleos*, which means 'end' or 'goal.' The term therefore signifies anything that evidences

⁷⁵ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmological-argument/#6>

purpose and exhibits that certain order of parts that tends toward a goal. The argument's logical syllogism is fairly straightforward: (1) Whatever gives proof of design must have had a designer; (2) The Universe gives proof of design. (3) Therefore, it must have had a designer.⁷⁶ Shedd adds, "The *Teleological Argument* is derived from a particular characteristic of the world: namely, the marks of design and adaptation to an end (*teleos*) which appear in it."⁷⁷

It is difficult for the human mind not to perceive such order in the universe as would reasonably be considered the result of design. Even the materialist cannot deny that matter – even matter before further organization into the universe – possesses such characteristics of nuclear order that appear far from arbitrary. The ancient Roman orator Cicero, certainly no evangelical, stated that he "would not believe that the world is the product of mere chance till I shall see that boxes of letters, used to teach children the alphabet, will arrange themselves, by merely being overturned, into well-reasoned treatises."⁷⁸ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy makes a remarkable statement in the opening paragraph of its article on the Teleological Argument, "Some phenomena within nature exhibit such exquisiteness of structure, function, or interconnectedness that many people have found it natural – if not inescapable – to see a deliberative and directive mind behind those phenomena."⁷⁹

"Some" phenomena? The author of the article ought to be challenged to produce *one* phenomenon in nature that *does not* exhibit exquisiteness of structure, function, or interconnectedness! Herman Bavinck writes, "The teleological argument deduces an intelligent cause from the order and beauty, the harmony and purpose evident in the universe as a whole and also in individual creatures, starry heavens, elements, the earth, man, animals, plants, the hand, the eyes, etc."⁸⁰ Indeed, as we have argued before, these

⁷⁶ Boyce; 38.

⁷⁷ Shedd; 245.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Hahn; 35-36.

⁷⁹ Plato.stanford.edu *Teleological Argument for the Existence of God*.

⁸⁰ Bavinck, Herman; *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1955); 70.

very characteristics of nature make it a fit object for science: it is the intention of the scientist to discover the structure, function, and interconnectedness of whatever aspect of nature he or she is studying. If these aspects are not exhibited, there can be no science at all, for no current observation could be reduced to a mathematical explanation (there is hardly a more orderly, structured, and interconnected field than mathematics!), and no subsequent behavior could be predicted from past and current observation. The materialistic scientist *claims* that there is no evidence of design in the universe, but he practices his craft in full expectation of such evidence being there.

The Teleological Argument contains perhaps the most powerful weapon against all gainsayers: it appeals to common sense. There is no man alive who does not presuppose an artist when he sees a painting, an architect and builder when he enters a building, or an engineer when he boards a plane. No doubt he may consider the art ugly, the building a monstrosity, and have little confidence in the stability of the airplane. But that these items were produced by mere chance, without a guiding intellect, never enters his mind. Even a philosopher of the caliber of Emmanuel Kant could not refute the Teleological Argument; he considered it the most sound of all such 'proofs' of the divine existence. Thus, unlike the more esoteric *a priori* arguments – the Ontological and Cosmological – this argument touches the human intellect on its surface, and really demands no more than common sense. "The argument to God from

the world and its regularity is, I believe, a codification by philosophers of a natural and rational reaction to an orderly world deeply embedded in the human consciousness."⁸¹ And only a philosopher could define 'common sense' in such a convoluted manner.

Thus the objections to the Teleological Argument are not difficult to refute. The first, that there is no 'design' or 'purpose' in nature, but only the appearance of such, is ridi-



Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

⁸¹ Swinburne; 54.

culous on the face of it. It asks man to believe the unbelievable: that the 'appearance' of design not be taken for the reality of design. Charles Hodge hits upon the real reason the materialist must make such a untenable claim with regard to the powerful evidence all around him: he cannot accept the evidence of purpose because purpose necessitates a Person and not merely a force. Hodge writes,

The doctrine of final causes in nature must stand or fall the doctrine of a personal God. The one cannot be denied without denying the other. And the admission of the one involves the admission of the other. By final cause is not meant a mere tendency, or the end to which events either actually or apparently tend; but the end contemplated in the use of means adapted to attain it. The contemplation of an end [*sic*], is a mental act. The selection and use of means adapted to attain such end, are both intelligent and voluntary acts. But an intelligent and voluntary agent is a person.⁸²

The second argument against the Teleological proof is that the design of the universe is not perfect, and therefore it could not have been designed. This is the best that the British philosopher Bertrand Russell could offer in opposition to the Argument from Design,

When you come to look into this argument from design, it is a most astonishing thing that people can believe that this world, with all the things that are in it, with all its defects, should be the best that omnipotence and omniscience have been able to produce in millions of years. I really cannot believe it. Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Klu Klux Klan or the Fascists?⁸³

This is not an argument; this is pedantic raving. *Imperfection* does not negate *design*, though it does logically induce the conclusion that either the designer himself is imperfect, or that something has happened to corrupt an otherwise perfect design. Russell would, perhaps, have us believe that the Earth ought to orbit the Sun in a perfect circle rather than an ellipse, as a circle is a more perfect geometrical shape than an ellipse. That the Earth orbits in *any* geometrical and mathematical pattern is the main point.

⁸² Hodge; *Systematic Theology*; 227.

⁸³ Russell; *Why I Am Not a Christian*; 10.

Russell might respond that this occurs simply due to the Law of Gravitational Attraction. But 'laws' are made to set order, and discovered by scientists due to the order they observe. To conclude that there is no evidence of design or purpose, simply because the evidence is less than perfect, is irrational. Russell would have been better served by investigating the cause of the imperfection, rather than ignorantly and arrogantly denying the fact that even the evidence of imperfection implies a perfect standard by which to judge what he perceived. "The evils of the world, even in their total, can not be considered of sufficient conclusiveness to prove anything against the existence of Providence."⁸⁴

The question is: why do design arguments remain so durable if empirical evidence is inferentially ambiguous, the arguments logically controversial, and the conclusions vociferously disputed? One possibility is that they really are better arguments than most philosophical critics concede.⁸⁵

Are people paid to write this stuff?

The Moral Argument: *The Universality of Morality and Law:*

Part of the order and beauty found in the universe is undeniably moral, and not merely physical. But morality is an abstract concept, unobservable under a microscope or in a telescope. Also, morality serves a purpose just as much as the physical order and laws that are thus observable. Add to this the universality of morality (not the uniformity; that is an important distinction), and one logically concludes that moral thought is innate within man. The fact that no such behavior is observable within the lower animals intensified the uniqueness of the moral character of man, and further demands an explanation. This leads to the Moral Argument for the existence of God, our second *a posteriori* argument.

The *Moral Argument* is stated in two modes: 1. Conscience testifies to the fact of obedience, or of disobedience, of a moral law. This implies a law giver...2. We observe an inequality

⁸⁴ Hahn; 36.

⁸⁵ Stanford Encyclopedia; *Teleological Argument: Section 5.*

between the happiness of good and bad men, here upon earth. This requires an adjustment hereafter. This implies a righteous arbiter and judge.⁸⁶

From these two aspects of human moral nature, Kant deduced both the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.⁸⁷ To be sure, there is and always has been disagreement among men as to what is right and what is wrong. But like the argument from imperfection discussed earlier, this fact cannot negate the common human awareness of right and wrong, upon which these arguments are based. If man did not possess a moral nature, there would be no such arguments among men.

The inimitable C. S. Lewis finds the strongest evidence for this underlying 'law' of moral behavior in this human tendency to *quarrel*. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis comments that a disagreement among men might lead to a fight, as it does among animals. But only a mysteriously agreed upon, underlying rule of 'right and wrong' can lead to a quarrel. If two men did not share this basic commonality of understanding, "they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not *quarrel* in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are."⁸⁸



C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Morality is a law written upon the human heart. The Apostle Paul acknowledges this moral power functioning even in the uncircumcised Gentile,

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them...

(Romans 2:14-15)

⁸⁶ Shedd; 247-248.

⁸⁷ Hahn; 98.

⁸⁸ Lewis, C. S.; *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan; 1952); 17-18.

Again, the purpose of this session in discussing the arguments for the existence of God is not to arrive at the God self-revealed in Scripture, nor to establish a particular paradigm of design or morality. It is rather to rationally consider the *explanation* of that which all men everywhere observe. The materialist explains morality by essentially denying: calling it a product of molecular evolution, from which mankind derived the benefits of society and, hence, a greater chance of survival. This statement of the evolutionist is then 'confirmed' by the materialist neuroscientist, who claims that all 'moral thoughts' are merely certain combinations and 'firings' of neurochemicals in the human brain, without any objective validity beyond the mind that conceives them. One does not need to be a philosopher to see what destructive results must come from such theories, such results as have been witnessed in human history, and are perhaps being witnessed in our own day.

But the denial of morality's validity does not make Right and Wrong go away, just as the denial of purpose and design cannot overcome human common sense.

Without God, the wise Governor of the universe, and without a future life for the compensation of virtue, there is no proportion and no correspondence imaginable between morality and happiness and between worthiness and destiny...Without God and a future life, the ideas of morality and virtue are mere matters of convenience, of expediency, of approval to serve man's purposes; and there is no reason why they should not be changed or given up entirely if expedient...Without God and a future life, all hopes, cravings and ideals of man's moral, mental and spiritual constitution would be nothing else but tormenting illusions, impractical ideas, tantalizing hopes and irreconcilable discrepancies.⁸⁹

Though we have not investigated every 'argument' for the existence of God that has been formulated over the course of human history, and the history of human philosophy, we have nevertheless sampled enough to begin to pass judgment on the effectiveness of these arguments to their end: Do they, in fact and beyond refutation, *prove* that God exists? As with almost everything in the realm of Philosophy, the question does

⁸⁹ Hahn; 99.

not admit of a single, simple answer. We offer, therefore, three observations as to the worth of the arguments for the existence of God.

First, they succeed better as 'testimonies' than as 'proofs.' In other words, when one hears one of the syllogisms laid out, there is an initial agreement and rational approbation; we consider that they make sense, and that they do seem to answer to what we observe in the world around us. Of course, that does not stop man from exercising extreme mental activity to rid himself of this initial assent, and to derive numerous refutations and objections to the common-sensical 'proofs' presented. Thus they serve to bear witness to what our own minds naturally comprehend and accept, unless we force our minds to deny the rational explanations of what we observe: we chose to ignore the testimony; we have the power and, due to sin, the predisposition to do so.

Second, the arguments are far more convincing to believers than to unbelievers. By 'believers' at this point we mean 'theists,' and not necessarily Christians. The vast majority of mankind are not interested in exerting the mental effort necessary to deny what is so obvious to their senses and to their common sense. Bavinck writes,

There is not a single object the existence of which we hesitate to accept until definite proofs are furnished. Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. Spontaneously, altogether involuntarily: without any constraint or coercion, we accept that existence. Now the same is true in regard to the existence of God.⁹⁰

It is argued by most Christian proponents of the arguments, that the knowledge of God requires the faith that is given by God in salvation. But this contradicts what the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1, that the knowledge of God is innate in every man and holds sway in every man's conscience until that conscience is seared by intense and wicked effort. This is not, of course, to imply that what unbelieving man knows about God is in any sense comprehensive or true, but merely to speak of just one aspect of God: His existence. This man cannot deny; in this he is 'without excuse.'

⁹⁰ Bavinck; 78.

Finally, we may reasonably conclude that the apologetic value of the arguments is greater *en masse* than *solo* – more convincing taken together than individually. They serve to strengthen the believer’s faith, especially in the midst of unbelieving attacks upon the ‘rationality’ of a belief in God prevalent in the post-modern West. They also serve to challenge the unbelievers world & life view – his *weltanschauung* – though they are incapable of bringing an unbeliever to salvation.

Nevertheless reflection, though not conveying certainty in regard to existing reality, does lead to greater clearness and perspicuity. For the believer the so-called proofs for the existence of God account for his own religious and ethical consciousness. They provide him with weapons wherewith he is able to repulse the attacks of the opponent, who, to say the least, is not better armed than he. They signify to the Christian that it is one and the same God who reveals himself in nature and in grace...Moreover, altogether the testimonies of God which proceed into the world and are manifest to us, being summed up in the so-called proofs, are nothing else than the revelation of the *Name of the Lord* by means of which he designates himself to the ear of his creatures giving us the right to address him. Taken together they reveal to us God, a being necessarily present in our thought, and necessarily viewed as actually existing: the only, first, and absolute cause of all creatures, consciously and purposively [*sic*] reigning over all things, and to whomsoever believeth manifesting himself, especially in conscience, as the Holy One.⁹¹

Recommended Supplemental Reading (required for Certificate Program):

Boyce, James Pettigrew; *Abstract of Systematic Theology, Chapter 2*: online at
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/boyce/theology.html>.

Hodge, Charles; *Systematic Theology: Chapter 2 – Theism*: available online at
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hodge/theology1.iv.ii.html>.

Session 4 – Reason & Revelation

----- Unit 4a -----

Reason & Faith:

⁹¹ Bavinck; 80.

Perhaps the various arguments for the existence of God are not completely convincing; perhaps they have some logical holes in their syllogisms; perhaps the average atheist will not be impressed by such words as 'ontological' and 'teleological'; but it is undeniably true that these arguments at least show that a belief in God is not *unreasonable*. They form the intellectual equivalent of nature itself, which the Apostle Paul uses to indict the unbeliever,

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.
(Romans 1:20)

Nature testifies of the existence of God in a manner than can only be denied by strenuous mental effort on the part of the unbeliever. The psalmist sings of the proclamation of the glory of God, that Creation heralds to every nation and in every tongue (Psalm 19:1-6), proving that one does not have to possess a special dose of grace or of 'religion' to be able to acknowledge the existence of God through what His hands have wrought. Implied in passages such as these – Psalm 19 and Romans 1 – is that man does more than merely observe Nature, he *thinks* about it. The arguments for the existence of God are the logical formulations of that thought-work. And these passages, far from indicating a deep, metaphysical contemplation of the divine handiwork, represent the most basic and surface understanding of all mankind – rendering man 'without excuse.' It is by effort, we say therefore, that the atheist is what he is; his folly has been arduously learned, the denial of what should be obvious to his senses is exercised unbelief. "Atheism, which reduces to silence this inner voice, not only makes of the world a huge lunatic asylum, but makes despair itself to rank as wisdom."⁹² The atheist has strengthened his mind in folly, and rendered himself immune to logical arguments. "For him who feels not God in himself, and in all spheres of life, you will not succeed in demonstrating God by proofs."⁹³

⁹² Van Oosterzie, J. J.; *Christian Dogmatics* (London: Hodder & Stoughton; 1891); 242.

⁹³ Van Oosterzie; 241.

Yet to the theist, and especially to the believer in the God of the Bible, continued meditation on such rational arguments as have been put forth in these lessons, tends to strengthen faith as well as to further explain the phenomena of Nature. As Richard Swinburne notes in his book, *Is There A God?*, the scientific consideration of the phenomena of Being, of Causation, of Design & Purpose, of Morality, and so forth, furnishes the most logical and reasonable explanation – the *simplest* explanation – to the daily experiences of every man. The theist agrees then with Stephen Charnock, “Without owning a God as the first cause of the world, no man can give any tolerable or



James Henley Thornwell (1812-62)

satisfactory account of the world to his own reason.”⁹⁴

Indeed, the very functions of human reason presuppose a divine Creator or Image, a ‘divine Mind’ of which man’s mind is the replica. The 19th Century Presbyterian theologian, James Henley Thornwell, devoted a great deal of time in his lectures to establishing the reasonableness of theism, and the corresponding unreasonableness (biblical ‘folly’) of atheism. Along with theologians and

philosophers down through the ages, Thornwell asserts

that the very pro-

cesses of rational thought are impossible and inconceivable apart from the existence of a God, whose creation Man is and whose imprint Man bears. Thornwell writes,

Unless, therefore, our reason is a lie, there is a God who made us and ordained the order which constitutes the beauty and the glory of the Universe. These heavens and this earth, this wondrous frame of ours and that more wondrous spirit within, are the products of His power and the contrivance of His infinite wisdom.⁹⁵

To this William G. T. Shedd adds,

⁹⁴ Charnock; *Existence & Attributes*; 51.

⁹⁵ Thornwell, James Henley; *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell: Volume I* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1974); 63.

Human knowledge, then, considered from this point of view, is an unwritten revelation because it is not aboriginal and self-subsistent, but derived. It issues ultimately from a higher source than the finite intelligence. Human reason has the ground of its authority in the Supreme Reason.⁹⁶

Quotes might be added *ad nauseum*, from ancient and modern philosophers and theologians, to the same effect, but these are sufficient to establish, as best as man is able, that a belief in God is eminently reasonable. Still, we have also seen that error may be encountered on the other end of the spectrum from rank atheism: pretending to be able to know all that there is to know about God. We began the study of the existence of God by declaring, along with the theological voice of the Church for millennia, that God is *incomprehensible*. Without reiterating all that was said previously about the concept of the incomprehensibility of God, we simply summarize here by saying that the knowledge of God is impossible for Man to attain *fully* and *comprehensively*. This fact – also eminently reasonable when one considers the capacity of a finite, human mind in apprehending and comprehending the Infinite – raises the questions of just what it is Man can know about God, and from what source does such knowledge come.

The mere concept of the incomprehensibility of God can and has led to the adoption of *agnosticism* – the acknowledgement that a God does (or at least probably does) exist, but that Man is incapable of knowing anything about Him. If the distinction between the finite and the Infinite is exaggerated, no other conclusion is reasonable but this: we are of sufficient mental powers to know that a God exists, but insufficient to assign to Him any other attribute but mere existence. This point of view has fueled paganism and superstition as well as agnosticism; mankind cut adrift from any positive knowledge of the Divine Being, is a functioning agnostic and truly ‘grope after God in the darkness’ (Acts 17:27). “We cannot comprehend God; if we could, we should cease to be finite; and because we cannot comprehend him, we erect strange images of him in our fancies and affections.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Shedd; *Dogmatic Theology*; 64.

⁹⁷ Charnock; 155.

This fact of God's incomprehensibility, arising as it does from the qualitative difference between man's mental capacity (finite) and the object of his inquiry (the Infinite), is rather to be viewed as an intellectual challenge than an epistemological prohibition. The mere fact that man cannot *not know* the existence of God is a powerful motivation to man to *seek to know* as much about God as is humanly and finitely possible. "[A]s he cannot be comprehended in his essence, he cannot be unknown in his existence; it is as easy by reason to understand that he is, as it is difficult to know what he is."⁹⁸ The knowledge of God's existence, undeniable unless one works powerfully to quench it, is but the *hors d'oeuvre* to the pursuit of a deeper and more meaningful knowledge of God. Thus we acknowledge that "the finite can never hope to comprehend the Infinite as the Infinite comprehends itself," while also admitting that "either our whole nature is a lie, or the Being whom we thus know under the finite symbols (*i.e.*, Creation, Thought, Beauty, etc.) is the supreme and everlasting Jehovah."⁹⁹

Biblically, this almost unquenchable drive within the human mind to seek after and to comprehend the Divine Mind, is the very 'eternity' that God the Creator has set within every human heart (Eccl. 3:11). This renders atheism not only a crime against God, but also a crime against humanity - particularly the individual human being who thus murders his deepest consciousness and rationality. The vast majority of mankind throughout the ages, has at least apprehended that there exists a pathway from the finite to the Infinite - the map of which lies imprinted upon the human mind.

God is not the substance of things but their cause; hence, to a certain extent his existence and virtues can be known from his works, by means of perception and thought. We can speak of innate knowledge only in this sense; *viz.*, that there has been created in our mind a natural inclination to proceed from the finite to the Infinite, from particulars to universals.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*; 26.

⁹⁹ Thornwell; *Collected Writings: Vol. I*; 125-26.

¹⁰⁰ Bavinck; *The Doctrine of God*; 51.

This inner drive brings us to the consideration of the role of Reason in attaining, to whatever degree possible, to a knowledge of God. This concept has, unfortunately, frequently pitted Reason against Faith, though in truth Faith is the foundation of all Reason. There have been some who hold that the realms of Faith and Reason are hermetically sealed: Reason deals with those things perceptible through the senses, while Faith handles the pronouncements of God and of the Church. This is a false dichotomy, for Faith can have no content but through Reason: Man cannot *believe* – in the true sense of the word – ignorantly. Others have maintained that Reason advances against Faith, as Science uncovers the rational laws by which Nature and the Universe are governed. But this solution does not properly pertain to the distinction between Reason and Faith, but rather between Reason and Superstition (though there are many who believe that Faith and Superstition are synonyms).

Another view held by several famous evangelical theologians, is that Faith is made necessary to Reason on account of human sin. John Calvin believed that “this seed of religion, though ineradicably implanted in man, can be choked and cannot bring forth good fruit: man no longer has an eye to see God; to do so he needs faith.”¹⁰¹ In this view of Faith and Reason, the former makes up for a serious deficiency in the latter. But this perspective rests upon the assumption that Man could comprehend the nature of God if only he had not sinned. This is an erroneous view, for Man – fallen or upright – remains a finite being, with a finite mind that cannot plumb the depths of an Infinite God. To be sure, sin has horribly corrupted human reason, and has all but placed any correct knowledge of God beyond Man’s rational power; but this speaks only to the *correctness* of Man’s understanding of God, not the *comprehensiveness*. The role of Faith would not have been abrogated if Adam had withstood his probation. Thornwell comments,

Had [Man] retained his integrity, the operations of his reason would have been uniformly right – his perceptions of truth clear and unclouded – and no contradiction could ever have been suspected between his deductions from the light of nature and the express

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*; 66.

communications of God. As a finite creature his knowledge would necessarily have been limited – he would have been subject to ignorance, but not to error...¹⁰²

It has always been part and parcel of the Reformed faith, that Faith contains a significant Rational component. As Paul exhorts all believers “*with one mind to strive for the faith of the Gospel,*” Reformed theologians have consistently emphasized the role of Reason in the operation of Faith. The very exercise of discipleship is called “*the renewing of your minds*” through the obedience of faith. Faith itself teaches us that the God who has revealed Himself as existent through the majesty of His Creation, and who has placed within all men the knowledge that He can and must be sought, is also a God who permits Himself to be found. This knowledge of God must of necessity always be incomplete, but that does not mean that it must be in error. Man can know God *truly*, though he cannot know God *fully*. “*Whatsoever is in its own nature absolutely inconceivable is nothing; but not whatsoever is not fully comprehensible by our imperfect understanding.*”¹⁰³

But while the deity is in one sense the most mysterious of all objects of knowledge, in another sense he is the most luminous. No idea so impresses universal man as the idea of God. Neither space nor time, neither matter nor mind, neither life nor death, not sun, moon or stars, so influence the immediate consciousness of man in every clime, and in all his generations, as does that ‘Presence’ which, in Wordsworth’s phrase, ‘is not to be put by.’¹⁰⁴

The 19th Century Dutch theologian Jan Jacob van Oosterzie adds, “...we lay down the proposition that God may be truly known, not wholly, or as He is in Himself, but as and in so far as He reveals Himself.”¹⁰⁵ There is the key to the knowledge of God, and the content of our Faith: the Divine self-disclosure through Revelation.

----- Unit 4b -----

¹⁰² Thornwell, James Henley; “The Office of Reason in Regard to Revelation,” http://monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/thornwell_officereason.html; 6.

¹⁰³ Shedd; 57.

¹⁰⁴ *Idem*.

¹⁰⁵ Van Oosterzie; 237.

The Reasonableness of Revelation:

There seems to be a general opinion among modern atheists, as well as ancient agnostics, that if there were a God, it would be both unreasonable and impossible that such a God would communicate to His creatures. Yet if it is the case, as we have maintained, that the faculty of human Reason is but a transcript of the divine Mind, then it most truly stands to reason that there be some lines of communication between the Creator and the creature, between the self-existent Original and the awe-inspiring replica. If, however, the contention of the atheist were true, then all men would be counted among their number; all would be as ignorant of God and of the concept of God, as of any other nonentity. This lies in the fact of the incomprehensibility of God that we have already discussed, and in the finiteness of the human mind that can *receive* information concerning the divine, but can by no means *develop* such information on its own. In other words, if God did not in some way reveal Himself to Man, there is no rationally conceivable way that Man could possess even the most rudimentary concept of a God.

[I]t is evident that the idea in the divine mind can never be the immediate standard of truth to us. We cannot enter into the consciousness of God, and therefore cannot know His thoughts, as they lie in His infinite understanding, without some medium of external revelation. They must, in some way, be *manifested* or else remain for ever a secret with Himself.¹⁰⁶

The logic of revelation follows from a common principle of the direction of thought and knowledge: movement from the higher to the lower. Man is able to domesticate the animal, but the animal does not domesticate man (with the possible exception of cats, of course). This principle is why there will never be, in spite of the plethora of science fiction novels and films, a manmade computer that advances beyond its creators and takes over the world. The lesser will never attain to the great apart from the greater first revealing of itself to the lesser. The disciple may outpace his master, but that is only because, as human beings, they are on par with respect to capacity. It is irrational to think that a

¹⁰⁶ Thornwell; *Collected Writings: Vol. I*; 29.

lower form of being can attain to the understanding of a higher form, if there is no prior movement from the higher form in the downward direction. Augustine applies this principle to the knowledge of God, "God condescends to us, in order that we may rise to Him."¹⁰⁷

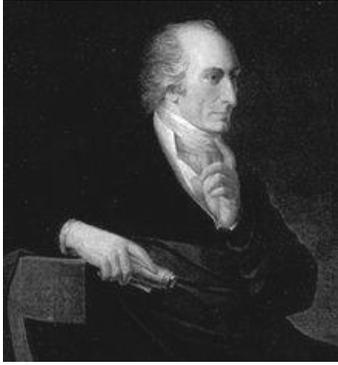
To consider the potential knowledge of God in any other manner is to attribute omniscience to Man: a similarity in the rational capacities of God and Man not only in kind, but also in degree. Speaking of those philosophers that taught that Man can attain to a true knowledge of God solely through his rational faculties in the study of Nature, Thornwell comments, "The legitimate conclusion from their principles is, either that man possess, in his natural faculties and resources, the means of omniscience, or that whatever God knows beyond the reach of reason, must forever remain an impenetrable secret with Himself."¹⁰⁸

There is another, and equally important, aspect to the correspondence between the divine Creator and His rational creation: the fact of receptivity on the part of Man. To follow the analogy of domestication further, it is clear that only certain animal species are capable of receiving the training to make them pets or service oriented animals. There is a degree of receptivity in the animal to the commands of the higher being, Man. So also there is the presumption – reasonable, to be sure – that Man is capable of receiving the revelation directed his way by God. Van Oosterzie comments, "If He willed to keep Himself concealed, who could discover Him? But if He willed to reveal Himself, who shall dispute to man the possession of an eye wherewith to contemplate the beaming of His light?"¹⁰⁹ The lack of comprehension of which John speaks in John 1:4, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not,*" is not natural but culpable. Man is capable of receiving the revelation of God on the basis of two characteristics of the communication. The first is that Man, created in the image

¹⁰⁷ Quoted by van Oosterzie; 255. *Condescendit nobis Deus, ut nos consurgamus.*

¹⁰⁸ Thornwell; *The Office of Reason*; 17.

¹⁰⁹ Van Oosterzie; 237.



Friedrich Jacobi (1743-1819)

of God, reasons and perceives in a manner similar to the way God reasons and perceives – common in *kind*, vastly different in *degree*.¹¹⁰ The second characteristic is the manner in which God formulates His self-disclosure: God anthropomorphizes – He adopts human forms and feelings – in order to communicate with Man on a level that may be apprehended by the latter. These two characteristics, taken

together, are summed up in the aphorism of Friedrich Jacobi, “In creating man God theomorphosied; therefore man necessarily anthropomorposises.”¹¹¹ God made Man as a ‘God-form,’ and now communicates to Man in ‘Man-forms.’ To put it another way, God communicates, both through Nature and Scripture, in a form that Man can understand; and Man understands the manner in which God reveals Himself.

To argue against the reasonableness of revelation is, first of all, to claim for the divine Being an inability to communicate with lesser beings – a notion that is itself irrational. And second, it is to categorically deny the experience of all mankind throughout history: the sublime awareness that such a Being exists, and has and does communicate with Man.

The gift of revelation must of course depend absolutely upon the will of God. It is not for man to say, before it is given, whether it certainly will, or will not, be bestowed. That it is not improbably may be inferred from the fact that God has already made himself known to us in various ways in ourselves and in nature.¹¹²

Boyce’s comment regarding God’s self-disclosure *in man* is significant, as we have seen already that Man himself is inexplicable apart from the existence of God. There is an important sense in which Man is the supreme revelation of God – certainly that is true with regard to the Son of Man, the Logos of God, Jesus Christ. But more than any other creature or form within God’s created Cosmos, Man reflects and reveals the existence and

¹¹⁰ Shedd; 50.

¹¹¹ Quoted in van Oosterzie; 255.

¹¹² Boyce; 49.

nature of the divine Being, though Man himself is in no wise divine. The existence of Man - more so even than the existence of the Universe - *demand*s the existence of God for its explanation. "Man is even now God's image-bearer, God's offspring. He possesses a 'mind' by means of which he is able to discern God's power and divinity in the work of creation."¹¹³ This is the natural and unsullied conclusion of every rational man, be he theologian, philosopher, or merely conscious of the wonder of his own existence; as noted previously, it takes concerted effort to deny this marvel and revelation of God.

There is a revelation of God in all his works, not only in nature as such, but especially also in man. Indeed, man himself constitutes the most important object of God-revealing nature. Moreover, from the entire realm of nature (both within him and exterior to him) man receives impressions and perceptions, which, prior to all argumentation and discussion, imbue his consciousness with the idea of a Highest Being. It is God himself who does not leave any man without witness.¹¹⁴

Yet adherence to the obvious capability of Man to receive and comprehend the revelation of God in Nature and in the composition of the human mind, has often led to the error of believing that Man can know all that there is to know about God through study and meditation on these phenomena. This is to consider God as '*just such a one as*' Man himself, to lower the concept of God to that of an exalted Man. Thus while we discuss the reasonableness of revelation, and of mankind's ability and capacity to receive that revelation, we must also recognize the reasonableness of realizing the limitations incumbent upon the rational faculty of Man to know God in all His attributes. Human sin notwithstanding, Man cannot derive anything close to a full picture of God through the exercise of his own Reason. The data of the sensuous universe is insufficient for the human mind to derive an accurate picture of God. "However abundant may be the information thus conveyed to man, it is nevertheless clear that his knowledge in these directions must still remain very imperfect."¹¹⁵ The Apostle Paul acknowledges only two attributes of God available to man's comprehension through the created world: "*His*

¹¹³ Bavinck; 63.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*; 59.

¹¹⁵ Boyce; 48.

power and His Godhead." (Romans 1:20) God's holiness, His omniscience, His love and His justice, and especially His redemptive intent are all invisible to the seeking eye of human rationality. If these attributes and intentions of God are to be revealed to Man, it must be done by some other means than through Man's own rational cognition or through his senses; it must come via *Special Revelation*. In regard to this form of divine revelation, Thornwell writes, "Revelation may be contemplated as imparting to us truths which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man to conceive."¹¹⁶ Yet even in regard to Special Revelation, which Christians consider to be the content of Scripture, the role of Reason is not set aside or abrogated.

----- Unit 4c -----

The Office of Reason in Regard to Revelation:

Religious thought through the centuries of Christian history has vacillated chronically from the extreme of Rationalism on the one hand, to that of Pietism or Mysticism on the other. Theologians have found it difficult to strike a balance between the primacy of Faith and the primacy of Reason in the life of a believer and of the Church. To many the role of Faith is to believe – blindly, if need be – whatever is pronounced to be true by the Church. Thomas Aquinas held this view, and lent his considerable philosophical influence to the spread of such practice within Catholic Christianity. Hence Faith and Reason were, to a large extent, separated from one another: one to deal with the natural universe, the other to deal with religious doctrine.

It is not within the scope of a study into the Existence and Attributes of God, to hammer out the philosophical and epistemological relationships between Faith and Reason. Suffice it to say at this point that the two are inexorably intertwined; they cannot be separated into two different realms of human cognition. We *trust* our perceptions, and we *trust* the mental processes whereby we arrive at conclusions from sense perception or logical syllogism. These facts point to a dynamic role of Faith within the very process of

¹¹⁶ Thornwell; *The Office of Reason*; 12.

Reason. Our focus in this lesson, however, is the role of Reason in the determination and content of Faith. Do we 'believe' unreasoningly? Or does Reason process and flesh out what we first accept by Faith? It has been a hallmark of the Reformed faith, that Reason is not left at the altar of sacrifice for the believer who desires to worship the Father "*in spirit and truth.*" If anything, the Reformed theologian is in danger of exalting Reason beyond its measure with respect to the content of his Faith.

As to the existence of God, we have already shown that such knowledge is available to all men, regardless of their 'faith position' vis-à-vis the redemptive work of God. "God in regard of his existence is not only the discovery of faith, but of reason."¹¹⁷ This is the clear indictment leveled by the Apostle Paul against all mankind in Romans Chapter 1. But we have also spoken of the impossibility of the finite human mind to discover the Infinite unless the Infinite chooses to reveal itself to the human mind. This phenomenon is called revelation, and it is generally the area wherein lies most of the confusion with regard to the respective roles of Reason and Faith. The very nature of the Christian religion as *propositional* indicates a fundamental role of Reason even within the exercise of Faith. Biblical language confirms this, as believers are referred to as those to whom, "*the Lord has opened the eyes.*" Several passages will suffice to show that there is indeed some role for Reason, or thought, to play in the acquisition of saving faith, though this is not to say that any one will or can be regenerate through the mere operation of the rational faculty.

*Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord **opened her heart to heed** the things spoken by Paul.*

(Acts 16:14)

*And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been **given to you to know** the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.*

(Matthew 11:10-11)

¹¹⁷ Charnock; 27.

One way to look at the role of Reason in the life of Faith is to separate the understanding between the biblical category of 'without excuse' and that of being 'filled with all knowledge.' The first set contains the entirety of the human race, for the mental faculties with which all men are equipped are sufficient to convince of the existence of God, and to understand the ramification and repercussions of that knowledge. This realm of knowledge is attained through simple observation, and the intellectual processes by which all men sort through these observations and arrive at common conclusions. Add to this the role of conscience as the arbiter of decisions and actions, and you have indisputable evidence of the existence of a Higher Mind, a Moral Lawgiver, etc., from which the faculties of human Reason flow. This knowledge requires the bare minimum of Reason, but no Faith. "Reason is that power in man, which enables him to have mental perceptions, to exercise thought, and reflection, to know facts, to inquire into their mutual relations, and to declare, logically, the conclusions which may be drawn from them."¹¹⁸ This rational faculty pertains to God as its object as much as Nature. Yet this is not a saving knowledge by any means, nor is it even such knowledge as is able to speak positively regarding the attributes of this Higher Being.

The second category is the realm of Faith: the special insight into the nature of God not merely considered as Creator, but also as Judge and Redeemer. This the area where human Reason runs into its finite limitations, its necessary inability to transcend that finiteness and attain the Infinite. This is the realm of Revelation. "By revelation, we mean the knowledge which God conveys by direct supernatural instruction..."¹¹⁹ In this realm the **first order of Reason** is to believe. "In regard to doctrines which are *known* to be a revelation from God, there can be no question as to the precise office of reason. The understanding is simply to believe...When God speaks, faith is the highest exercise of reason."¹²⁰ We must leave it until our next session to discuss just how it is that Reason *knows* something to be a "revelation from God," for there have been many claims to

¹¹⁸ Boyce; 46.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; 47.

¹²⁰ Thornwell; *The Office of Reason*; 4.

divine revelation beyond those contained in the Bible. The point here is that, once the fact of revelation is ascertained, it is the proper exercise and office of Reason, to believe.

This is not, as some would have it, mere 'blind faith.' It is, in fact, a real and *bona fide* action of the rational faculty of man: he is believing on the basis of established and trustworthy authority, against which it would be irrational to disbelieve. We experience this phenomenon all the time with regard to our own sense perceptions and rational processes. We *trust* the perceptions of our five senses or, if we cannot trust them, we seek medical diagnosis and prescription to restore them to trustworthiness. What we do not do is attempt to rationally prove that the objects perceived by the eyes, or the sounds perceived by the ears, are *real* or merely figments of imagination ('a blot of mustard, or a fragment of underdone potato,' as Ebenezer Scrooge would have it). "Intelligence begins with principles that must be accepted and not explained."¹²¹ It is the same in regard to man's spiritual senses, though these must be rejuvenated through the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit before they are able to properly perceive once again the self-disclosure of God in regard to His 'higher' attributes.

That there is such a realm as the spirit is, indeed, contested by the Materialist; no, not contested, it is simply denied. But once again the common consensus of humanity across the millennia, is that man possesses an immaterial soul; it is also the majority opinion of mankind historically that this soul is immortal as well. It is to this world that the believer is introduced through Faith, and it is in this world that the believer walks no longer by sight. Still, his Reason continues to play an indispensable part in the walk of faith.

What lies beyond the sphere of perception through the medium of the senses is not therefore to be excluded from the domain of spiritual experience and intellectual reasoning...What though faith we *understand* is by no means the fruit of a bare supposing, or highly probable conjecture, a being almost certain: the believer knows not only *that*, but

¹²¹ Thornwell; *Collected Writings: Volume I*; 83.

also truly *what*, and upon which ground, he believes...faith is the telescope by means of which the Infinite is brought within the field of vision for our spirit's eye.¹²²

Thus Reason bows to Faith on the basis of the indisputable authority of the Source. But Reason must also play a role in validating or confirming to itself that the Source is indeed authoritative. For the Christian, the Source of divine Revelation is the Scriptures, but at the moment of regeneration, along with the Faith that both harkens and calls upon Jesus Christ, there is also the acceptance by the Reason of the authority of the biblical revelation. Indeed, in spite of the fact that many professing Christians in the modern Church do not hold to an equivalence between *faith in Christ* and *acceptance of Scripture*, it is impossible for an evangelical to see things otherwise. The Reason is convinced at the moment that Faith is instilled, and subsequently that same Reason is confirmed through the continued witness of the biblical testimony. This inward confirmation is provided, of course, by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But it also comes by continued application of Reason to the characteristics of the Bible which authenticate its unique authority. These aspects of Scripture are its Unity and the Harmony of its parts. These qualities of Scripture will be discussed in greater detail in our next session, but it is important to mention here that it is the Reason of the believer that is strengthened by them to further believe the authority of the source of divine self-revelation.

We call it *reasonable*, not because reason discovered its doctrines or originated its precepts, but because it is consistent with itself – it is a system made up of parts, nicely adjusted and exquisitely arranged, and not a mass of insulated, incoherent, independent phenomena.¹²³

Thus the first order of the office of Reason in respect to Revelation is *to believe*. This is rational, not unreasonable. But it is not the end of Reason's work. The **second order of Reason** with respect to Revelation is to *rationalize*. This term is used not in its modern sense of 'making excuses for one's immoral or unethical behavior,' but rather in the traditional sense of 'exercising one's rational faculty in the subjugation of the material of

¹²² Van Oosterzie; 236.

¹²³ Thornwell; *The Office of Reason*; 18.

study to knowledge.’ In other words, it is the role of Reason to, in a sense, conquer the material of Revelation and to reduce it to a system of knowledge and understanding. This is the same process whereby Man reduces the data of Nature to a scientific understanding: systematizing, categorizing, defining and classifying, organizing and determining relations, and finally summarizing and concluding/predicting. This is simply how we think, and Christianity is by all means a ‘thinking’ faith.

This role of Reason is not that of a judge, but of an disciple. Man cannot sit in judgment over the content (much less the reality) of divine revelation, for reasons that have already been noted: the impossibility of the finite to rise above the Infinite.

[T]he office of reason in regard to supernatural mysteries, can never be negative. It cannot condemn them, because it has no law by which to try them – it is not a fit judge, because not a competent judge. It cannot say beforehand what a revelation should be – how it should be given – what it should contain, nor with what evidence it ought to be attended.¹²⁴

The scientist does not sit in judgment over what Nature reveals to him in the laboratory, nor does the theologian sit in judgment over what Revelation instructs him in the Bible. The office of Reason in this regard is *interpretation* and *assimilation*, but never judgment. “Interpretation is to theology what observation and experiment are to philosophy (*i.e.*, science).”¹²⁵ This use of Reason to organize and interpret the matter of Revelation *is* the science of Theology. God has so ordered His universe, and the mind of His image-bearer, Man, to force the exercise of Reason toward the comprehension of His works in all realms. In responding to the fact that the word ‘theology’ is not in the Bible (as neither is the word ‘trinity,’ for that matter), Thornwell writes,

As it was not the office of inspiration to present the truths of salvation in a scientific form, no more than it was the office of nature to present the facts of the universe in a scientific form; as God never makes science for us, but only gives us the data out of which we must

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*; 21.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*; 15.

construct it for ourselves; it is not to be expected that a word should be found in the Scriptures designating a science which it was not their function to realize.¹²⁶

Theology, therefore, is a work of Reason founded upon and fueled by Faith. The theologian trusts the veracity of the divine source no less than the scientist the validity of his own observations. It is a noble task, but left to itself it is a futile and dangerous one, for "*knowledge puffs up.*" Thus the **third order of Reason** with respect to Revelation is to *conform*. This is the stirring admonition of Paul to the Romans and to all believers across the ages,

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind**, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* (Romans 12:1-2)

The word translated 'transformed' is the Greek word from which we get the English 'metamorphosis.' This is a radical change of our character and our thinking, and it flows from the study of God's self-disclosure in Scripture, as the results of this 'scientific' endeavor are applied to the thoughts, desires, and actions of the believer. If this assimilation of the data is theology proper, then this application of the results is *discipleship*. Without the second order of Reason, the first is mere blind faith, empty of content and of meaning. Without the third order of Reason, the second is dangerous arrogance, intellectual pride, and sure error. All three are, by the grace of the indwelling Spirit, at all times progressing, though not at the same pace in all areas of biblical knowledge, and never attaining perfection in this life. Still, Faith informs Theology; Theology transforms Life.

¹²⁶ Thornwell; *Collected Writings: Volume I*; 26.

Recommended Supplemental Reading (required for Certificate Program):

Thornwell, James Henley; *The Office of Reason in Regard to Revelation*: online at
http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/thornwell_officereason.html.

Session 5 – Apocalyptic: The Self-Disclosure of God

----- Unit 5a -----

Apocalyptic: The Science of Revelation

It has only been in the very modern era – the past one hundred fifty years – that Theology has been demoted as a Science in the minds and opinions of general Western society. Theology is Religion; Faith, not Science. Or so we are now told. The concept of separation of Church and State has evolved into the separation of Theology from Science, and of Religion from Social Life. But by the classic definition of Science – the root of which is *scientia*; Latin for ‘knowledge’ – Theology, the study of the existence, attributes, and works of God, remains a Science to this day. For a Science is any field of study wherein the human mind gathers information through *observation* and subsequently orders that information into categories, with the goal of determining the normal and predictive behavior of certain phenomena. Science is knowledge that is *acquired*, as opposed to knowledge that is either *innate* or *intuitive*. While the capability of the knowledge of God is innate in Man (as is the capability of any and all knowledge), the actual knowledge of God is acquired through searching – exactly the function of Science.

The similarity between Theology and Science extends as well to the object of study. In any branch of scientific endeavor, the scientist is limited by what the object of his study is ‘willing’ to reveal of itself. Sometimes that revelation comes merely through additional observation; sometimes a quantum paradigm shift is required before the information is unlocked; and sometimes (many times?) the scientist does not even know what it is he is not learning, simply because the object of study is beyond his grasp. In the realm of Nature this phenomenon explains why the history of Science has so often proven to be cumulative; information building upon information, theories expanding upon earlier theories, with the occasional and necessary Copernican Revolution thrown in for good measure. So it has been with the self-disclosure of God: divine revelation has been

progressive, and even with the ultimate revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ, Man's understanding of that revelation continues to build and grow.

But here we find a unique and powerful difference between Theology and *Natural Science*. In the latter there is no spiritual or epistemological relationship between the observer and the observed; between the Subject and the Object. There is no 'connection' between the Chemist and the chemical, or the Geologist and the mineral. But in the study of God the Object is not only revealing Himself to those one who seeks, He also gives to Man the *ability* to know Him as He is revealed.

God is not only the object of knowledge, but he is also a personal and active *agent* who operates on the human mind so that it shall have this knowledge of Himself...God is the cause of man's knowledge of God not merely by the correlation between the two beings, but also by a direct energy operating upon man...God causes the human mind to know God by an inward and immediate efficiency, in addition to the correlation which he has established between the finite and Infinite Spirit.¹²⁷

This scientific phenomenon is known technically as Apocalypics: the study of revelation. For this is the true heart of Theology, the fact that Man does not search out and acquire knowledge concerning God, so much as *God reveals Himself to Man*. "If God does not reveal himself in his creatures, knowledge of him is evidently unattainable."¹²⁸ This comment is but a commentary on the words of our Lord,

All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.
(Matthew 11:27)

Where the word translated 'reveal' is the Greek *apokalupsai* (ἀποκαλύπτειν), from which we get the study, Apocalypics. "By Revelation we understand that work of the living God by which He, in certain ways and for certain ends, makes known to His rational creatures the secrets of His will and nature."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Shedd; 63-64.

¹²⁸ Bavinck; 41.

¹²⁹ Van Oosterzie; 102.

The conundrum here is that the Science of Theology is no less a Science just because the knowledge gained is the result of revelation from the object studied. By the will and ordinance of God, the One who makes Himself known does so only to those who seek Him, a statement that is just as true of the believer as of the sinner prior to regeneration. God continues both to give to His children the receptive capacity to know Him, and the manifestation of His being and attributes for His children to study to know Him by. We may justifiably paraphrase the apostle here: "Seek to know God with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in your mind, revealing Himself to your searching inquiry."

Furthermore, God's self-disclosure is not limited to the Bible but is profoundly manifested in four spheres of human understanding: Nature, Human Nature, Scripture, and, supremely, in the Person of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. "God really is what we believe Him to be, so far as our idea of Him is determined by the revelation which He has made of Himself in his works, in the constitution of our nature, in his word, and in the person of his Son."¹³⁰ The first two of these are referred to as **General Revelation**; the latter pair usually denominated **Special Revelation**. The first pair render man without excuse with regard to his ignorance of God: it is willful, according to the Apostle Paul in Romans Chapter 1. The second set is necessary to bring a sinner to the redemptive knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. All are manifestations of divine self-disclosure; all are objects of study in the field of Apocalypics.

So far all Revelation is only one; though real distinction, together with an undeniable union, exists between External and Internal, General and Special Revelation, the Revelation of words and of facts. The one as well as the other, but the special or extraordinary Revelation above all, offers to Christian Apocalypics a field for particular investigation, equally extensive and important.¹³¹

----- Unit 5b -----

General Revelation: God's Voice in Nature

¹³⁰ Hodge; 338.

¹³¹ Van Oosterzie; 102.

When we consider the historical phenomenon known as Natural Theology, we are usually intending the revelation of God in Creation: the fundamental basis for such arguments for the existence of God as that of causation and design. This is the category of divine self-disclosure of which the psalmist writes in Psalm 19,

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament shows His handiwork.
Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.
Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their words to the end of the world.* (Psalm 19:1-4)

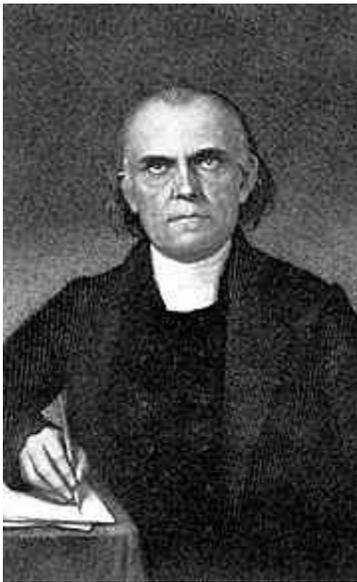
In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul establishes the universal knowledge and the willful ignorance and irreverence of Man upon the principal of God's self-disclosure in Creation,

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. **For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,** because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.* (Romans 1:18-23)

No Reformed theologian will maintain that the self-disclosure of God through Nature is sufficient to lead men from sin unto Christ. This is the error of the Rationalist and the Deist, the 'theologian' who deifies human reason and, in consequence, creates his own God from the observations he makes of Nature. The self-disclosure of God through His Creation is but the very beginning of the path of knowledge, it is no great credit to the rational faculty of any man to 'discover' God in nature. Calvin writes, "Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence his divineness far escapes all human perception. But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakably marks of his glory, so clear and

so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance.”¹³²

Natural Religion, as it were, is where all men begin in Adam. The awareness of the universe is naturally joined within the human mind with the awareness of a Creator. This knowledge can only be eradicated by the strenuous effort of unbelief. Indeed, “every plant, every atom, as well as every star, at the first meeting, whispers this in our ears, ‘I have a Creator; I am witness to a Deity.’”¹³³ Apart from the power of



J. L. Dagg (1794-1884)

unbelief through sin, this awareness of God through Creation would lead man to look higher, to seek out a deeper knowledge of that Creator; but man is here blocked by the corrupt nature he has inherited from his forefather Adam, caused by the initial rebellion and Fall. “Though insufficient to meet the wants of man in his fallen condition, [Natural Religion] teaches the fundamental truths on which all religion is based.”¹³⁴ It appears that the great danger in the direction of Natural Theology and Natural Religion, is the incredible amount of *data* that is available, with regard to the revelation of

God, through the works of His hands. The natural scientist need not become an atheist through his study of Nature, for “there is not an atom of the universe in which God’s power and divinity are not revealed.”¹³⁵ But it is also true that he may not become a Christian by that pursuit, either. “However abundant may be the information thus conveyed to man, it is nevertheless clear that his knowledge in these directions must still remain very imperfect.”¹³⁶

¹³² Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume I* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; 1960); 32.

¹³³ Charnock; 43.

¹³⁴ Dagg, John L. *Manual of Theology and Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications; 1982); 21.

¹³⁵ Bavinck; 63.

¹³⁶ Boyce; 48.

Natural Theology does not and cannot stop, however, at the self-disclosure of God in the works of His creative hand. Actually, there is a creative aspect of Nature that fundamentally precedes our comprehension of the world in which we live, and in which God's glory is manifest. That is, *human* nature. It is most profoundly true that Man recognizes the hand of God within nature due to the fact that Man observes nature through the eyes of God, as it were, having been imprinted with the image of God himself. Bavinck writes,

There is a revelation of God in all his works, not only in nature as such, but especially also in man. Indeed, man himself constitutes the most important object of God-revealing nature. Moreover, from the entire realm of nature (both within him and exterior to him: man receives impressions and perceptions, which, prior to all argumentation and discussion, imbue his consciousness with the idea of a Highest Being. It is God himself who does not leave any man without witness.¹³⁷

Because Man is created in the image of God, he is not mistaken when he contemplates God in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic word-forms. All of the various manifestations of the divine nature have been revealed to Man in terms that he can understand, yet they are accurate insofar as they describe the One of whom Man is the image. "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy."¹³⁸ The mercy of God, the divine power and knowledge, the love of God and His wrath, are not mere approximations to the knowledge that Man has of his Creator; they are real and true descriptions of the nature of God in thought-forms appropriate to the image-bearer Man. "We are the children of God, and, therefore, we are like Him. We are, therefore, authorized to ascribe to Him all the attributes of our own natures as rational creatures, without limitation, and to an infinite degree. If we are like God, God is like us."¹³⁹ This is, to be sure, a rationalistic argument and subject both to misinterpretation and to misuse.

¹³⁷ Bavinck; 59.

¹³⁸ *Calvin's Institutes*; 43.

¹³⁹ Hodge; 339.

But it is the same argumentation utilized by the Apostle Paul when confronting the philosophers on Mars Hill,

And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.
(Acts 17:26-29)

James Henley Thornwell states this fact most succinctly and most poetically, "Man, therefore, sits for the picture that he sketches of God."¹⁴⁰ This fact is, sadly, the root of all idolatry and pagan error; but it is also the foundation of the believer's comprehension of the incomprehensible God. "The possibility of theology depends upon the postulate that man reflects the image of His Maker."¹⁴¹ By God's grace, we do not approach Him in His self-disclosure as to a completely foreign entity. If it were so, then all knowledge of Him by Man would be impossible. Rather, "guided by the analogy of our own natures we expect to find in him a personal, conscious, intelligent, and moral being, and this expectation is confirmed by the manifestations of his presence, and operations in the universe."¹⁴²

Thus true theology works as a reciprocal process whereby man contemplates himself in God, and God in himself. It is for this reason that Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with two sections concerning the Knowledge of God the Creator. The first is titled, "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God." The second, "Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self." Under the first heading he writes,

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one

¹⁴⁰ Thornwell; *Collected Writings: Volume 1*; 112.

¹⁴¹ *Idem*.

¹⁴² Boyce; 9.

can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he 'lives and moves.' For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves.¹⁴³

But this same contemplation of our own nature, which ought to lead us to contemplate the nature of God, is reciprocally strengthened and clarified by what we discover when we do look to God, our Maker. "Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face."¹⁴⁴ But this is a cycle that natural, fallen man cannot escape, and which cannot lead him to either the true knowledge of God or of himself. He is, in Calvin's favorite term, within a labyrinth until his mind be enlightened to the true knowledge of both God and himself through the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Natural revelation, whether in Creation or in Man himself, is wholly insufficient to bring a man to the knowledge that he most wants and needs: the saving knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. That is the realm and province of **Special Revelation** alone.

----- Unit 5c -----

Special Revelation: God's Voice from Heaven

Turning to the realm of Special Revelation, it is important to note up front that, while absolutely necessary for man to come to a true and saving knowledge of God, this form of revelation does not negate the value and content of the General Revelation we have been discussing. The oft-heard mantra, 'No Book but the Bible,' is not only simplistic, it is simply wrong. "If a general revelation is given in Nature, History, Humanity, the special is certainly not unnatural, unhistorical, extra-human. Thus the last does not supplant the first, still less does it contradict it, but completes and crowns it."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ *Calvin's Institutes*; 35.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; 37.

¹⁴⁵ Van Oosterzie; 108.

We remember that the psalmist, in outlining the praiseworthiness of God, directs our thoughts to nature in Psalm 19 and to Man in Psalm 8,

*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him,
And the son of man that You visit him?
For You have made him a little lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.* (Psalm 8:3-5)

Thus the insufficiency and incompleteness of General Revelation – due in large measure to the fallen state of mankind – do not diminish the truth content and critical value of this form of divine self-disclosure, not only to render man without excuse before the judgment seat of God, but to provide the epistemological, moral, and religious framework within which Special Revelation completes the spiritual habitation.

Considering this, we may assign as the subject matter of General Revelation, first, the certainty of God's existence as supreme Cause of all things; secondly, the majesty of His being as the mighty Creator, the wise Governor, the tender Provider of all, whose justice and independence became apparent in the course of the world's history; while conscience in particular expressly proclaims His holiness; and, lastly, the holiness of His claims, which follows of itself from what has been said.¹⁴⁶

This mistake of neglecting General Revelation is analogous to a second, equally common error among modern evangelicals: the neglect of the Old Testament in favor – often exclusive favor – of the New Testament. This phenomenon is manifested most vividly in the publication, only beginning in the 20th Century, of 'The New Testament and Psalms' as if this combination represents all that is necessary of the Bible. Evangelicals defend the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture on the dogmatic and technical level, but often practice a different perspective altogether. Therefore, when we speak of Special Revelation, we intend both theoretically and practically the *entire* Bible, being the composite whole of divine self-disclosure in written form. Yet even here we

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; 110.

must admit the insufficiency of Scripture as a comprehensive and complete revelation of God, on the basis of the fact that God Himself did not stop or conclude His self-disclosure until He had revealed Himself fully and finally in His Son. Thus we mean by Special Revelation not only the Bible in both Testaments, but also and especially the revelation of God through the living Word, the Logos of God, Jesus Christ.

The necessity of Special Revelation rests wholly upon the fallen condition of Man in sin, and cannot be proven on any other basis. Rationalists have denigrated the Bible, and have minimized its value for mankind's advancement, due to the insufficient doctrine of sin held by that philosophical school. But it is equally the case that evangelicals have erred with regard to the apologetics of Bibliology – the study of the Bible – in thinking that the divine inspiration of the Word can be proven by its antiquity, its unity, its harmony. No more can the deity of Jesus Christ be proven by His good works, His miracles, or even His resurrection.

Its necessity [*i.e.*, Special Revelation]...springs from the miserable position into which the dominion of error, sin, misery, and death has brought all mankind. It cannot, therefore, be proved to any one who ignores the power of sin and the necessity of redemption.¹⁴⁷

The essence of Special Revelation, as it pertains to human reception, is faith. This runs parallel to what has already been said about the knowledge of God through Nature: that God is both the Object and the Agent of human perception and understanding of Creation and of human nature. There, in General Revelation, the capacity for apprehension is innate to all men as a vestige of the *imago Dei*. Here, in Special Revelation, it is a characteristic of human thought lost in the Fall; man in sin no longer has the receptivity toward Special Revelation. This phenomenon is rational – the sin might make a communicative break between God and His creature is certainly a reasonable situation – but it is even more *real*. And it is the reality of this breach that establishes the fact that no man can be reasoned into salvation. You must be born again.

¹⁴⁷ Van Oosterzie; 112.

All this to say that Special Revelation requires the Special Reception that comes only through regeneration by the Holy Spirit. General Revelation is available to all men, and leaves all men inexcusable before God. Special Revelation is that additional work that God performs on the elect only, removing the heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh. Far be it for the Church to deny the right and benefit of any man to read the Bible; but it remains true that no real benefit or blessing can be gained by the unregenerate in the process.

The conviction that what God reveals is made known in its true nature, is the very essence of faith in the divine testimony. We are certain, therefore, that our ideas of God, founded on the testimony of his Word, correspond to what He really is, and constitute true knowledge. It is also to be remembered that while the testimony of men is to the mind, the testimony of God is not only to, but also within the mind. It illuminates and informs; so that the testimony of God is called the demonstration of the Spirit.¹⁴⁸

Thus, when the believer turns to the Word of God, the Scriptures, he does so with the full and conscious use of his own rational powers, knowing that the transformation (metamorphosis) that will take place is a 'renewing of the mind.' Scripture molds the otherwise confused and inchoate knowledge that man has gained from his observation of Nature and of Life, into an increasingly more accurate conception of God and the universe; "...so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God."¹⁴⁹

The relationship of the self-disclosure of God through His Creation, and that which comes through His written Word, is analogous to the revelation of a famous person, first, through a biography, and second, by means of an autobiography. Nature is the transcript of God's work in the universe and in history. The Cosmos declares the glory of God, but it does so from a third person perspective, as does an author of a biography. The facts are true, but they must fail to penetrate the deeper thoughts and intentions of the subject's heart and mind. Creation declares God to be great, to be

¹⁴⁸ Hodge; 364.

¹⁴⁹ *Calvin's Institutes*; Vol. I, 70.

powerful, to be good; but His mercy, His holiness, His justice are not to be found on Nature's pages, especially since sin has so corrupted the text. What God has wrought in Creation speaks to all mankind of His mighty acts, but is silent as to His intentions, His plans, His purposes. The biographer can tell his reader what such-and-such famous man did, but he can only conjecture as to why, unless the subject of the biography has told us himself.

That is the role of Holy Scripture: to reveal to believing man the 'thoughts and intents' of God's heart, at least to the extent that God desires them to be known and that man is capable of comprehending them. That Scripture grants to us this special view into the heart and mind of God, is testified by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth,

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (I Corinthians 2:10-12)

Theologians have offered many diverse opinions as to just what it is that God is primarily revealing of Himself in Scripture. Van Oosterzie, for instance, believes it to be the 'kingdom of God,'

The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments form together the authentic, and, as such, indispensable, documentary record of that which God has done, is doing, and will do, to establish His kingdom upon earth.¹⁵⁰

Another common view within evangelicalism, especially of the fundamentalist and Arminian forms, is that the Bible teaches man the path of salvation. W. G. T. Shedd quotes a popular aphorism with regard to the purpose of Scripture vis-à-vis natural science: "The purpose of the scriptures...is to teach how to go to heaven, not how the

¹⁵⁰ Van Oosterzie; 166.

heavens go.”¹⁵¹ And the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks with Question 3, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” answering, “The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”¹⁵²

This last answer seems to arrive closest to the truth with regard to the purpose of God in disclosing Himself through the written Word, yet cannot escape the ‘legal’ angle of obedience in its second clause. This is not to say that obedience to the divine will is not an integral and indispensable part of Scripture; it most certainly is that. But we are searching here for the *principal* purpose for which God has ‘sent forth His word,’ that it might not return to Him void. It is natural for man to inquire of the Lord what it is that He would have us do in order to be saved, but does that therefore constitute the primary purpose of God’s self-disclosure in Scripture? Is that not merely to superimpose man’s need upon God’s purpose? We would say, rather, that the intention of God in revealing Himself through the inspired written Word is, simply, to make Himself known in truth. Thus Hodge writes, “All the names and titles given to Him; all the attributes ascribed to Him; all the works attributed to Him, are revelations of what He truly is.”¹⁵³ Of course, this by no means leaves man untouched as to his own deepest need, for it is as Jesus Himself said, “*This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*”¹⁵⁴

Which passage brings us to the final and fullest aspect of the self-disclosure of God to Man: the revelation of God through His only-begotten and eternal Son, Jesus Christ. That the incarnation of the Second Person of the Godhead is first of all a most complete and compelling revelation of the divine nature, is made clear in the opening lines of the Epistle to the Hebrews,

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom

¹⁵¹ In Shedd; 104.

¹⁵²

http://www.reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?_top=http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC_frames.html

¹⁵³ Hodge; 344.

¹⁵⁴ John 17:3

also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person... (Hebrews 1:1-3)

It is not too much to say that, without the revelation of the Son, that of the Scriptures would remain powerless to convey to fallen man the true knowledge of God. And this statement pertains no less to man under the Old Covenant as to under the New, for the revelation of the Son of God is found in the theophanies of the Old Testament, the prophetic word, and the poetic psalms. We must believe, on the basis of the teachings of Scripture and the supremacy and necessity of Christ, that only those who are inwardly enlightened by the Son through the Spirit are able, in any measure at all, to attain to a true knowledge of God through the Scriptures. Is the statement, "No man knows the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son reveals Him," true only of mankind in the New Testament? Certainly it is equally true of all men before the coming of Christ as it is of all men since. And this final and fullest revelation of God in His Son is the resounding confirmation of the reciprocity between Man and God that we spoke of earlier in this lesson: God discloses Himself *to Man as Man*. The wonder of this divine act, and the majesty of this divine self-disclosure, will require all eternity to contemplate.

Philosophy must veil her face in the presence of Jesus Christ, as God manifest in the flesh. She may not presume in that presence to say that God is not, and is not known to be, what Christ himself most clearly was. This doctrine that God is the object of certain and true knowledge lies at the foundation of all religion, and therefore must never be given up.¹⁵⁵

Recommended Supplemental Reading (required for Certificate Program):

Berkouwer, G. C.; *General and Special Divine Revelation*: PDF online at

<http://www.monergism.com/search?keywords=Special+Revelation&format=All>.

¹⁵⁵ Hodge; 345.

Session 6 – Bibliology: The Study of Scripture

----- Unit 6a -----

The Elements of Bibliology:

The Apostle Paul admonished his son in the faith, Timothy, to “*study to show yourself approved, a skilled workman able to rightly handle the Word of Truth.*”¹⁵⁶ It is Paul’s tacit assumption – his as well as that of the other writers of Scripture – that the Bible is the Word of Truth simply because it is the Word of God. And that is the assumption or presupposition of the branch of Theology known as Bibliology: the Study of the Bible as the Revelation of God. This subset of theological study is necessary, as it is important for the student of any subject matter to understand in broad terms just what it is that he is studying. The tradition confession of Protestant Churches for the past five hundred years, is summed up succinctly by the recent *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978),

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms, obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises... Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.¹⁵⁷

This is a significant claim for a book penned by human authors, as all admit the Scriptures to be, and is one that is rejected by a significant percentage of the world’s population. Yet the authors of the Chicago Declaration also add, “We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith,”¹⁵⁸ a statement that puts the belief of biblical inspiration and inerrancy at the very crux of a true profession of the Christian faith. The evangelical, therefore, is often called upon to defend his or her belief in the

¹⁵⁶ II Timothy 2:15

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/icbi.html>

¹⁵⁸ *Idem*; Article XIX.

same characteristics of the Bible that are affirmed in this declaration. Does he understand them himself? What meaning do the words 'infallibility,' 'inerrancy,' or 'inspired' have in the average believer's mind? While he comes to the Bible with reverence, does he also do so with some measure of understanding? "The doctrine of Scripture is by no means shut up in the theologian's study. Its authority presents itself to us with the demand that we '*always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you*' (I Pet. 3L15). Our account of this hope cannot be separated from our confession that Scripture is the Word of God."¹⁵⁹

It is the purpose of Bibliology to convey that understanding: to investigate these very characteristics of Scripture that leave us with an infallible, inerrant, and inspired guide to the true nature of God and of His acts in and toward Creation. "Bibliology includes all the topics relating to the written revelation of God: namely, the Inspiration, Authenticity, Credibility, and Canonicity of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."¹⁶⁰ Thus it is the logical concomitant to Apocalypics, the study of Revelation, for the Scriptures represent the abiding and guiding *written* revelation of God to His people. We begin by focusing on this aspect of the Bible: its nature as *revelation* from God.

Scripture and Revelation:

When used with regard to Scripture, the word 'revelation' has a deeper significance than its usage with regard to Creation, in that the revelation of God through Scripture is written and definite. The revelation of Nature is indirect; Man in his observation of natural phenomena is left without any other simple and sensible explanation than that of a Creator. This witness is condemning to fallen man, not instructive as to the true and fuller nature of God, and of salvation. For this God has spoken directly in Scripture. We apply, therefore, a more specialized and narrow

¹⁵⁹ Berkouwer, G. C. *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1975); 10.

¹⁶⁰ Shedd; 61-62.

definition to the term when used with respect to the biblical witness of God to Himself and to His redemptive work in Creation. "Revelation in the restricted sense...denotes the communication of truth or facts hitherto unknown to man, and incapable of being deduced from the structure of the human intellect, or derived through the ordinary channels of human information."¹⁶¹

This definition leads us immediately to a distinction that must be made with regard to Scriptures: not all that is contained in the Bible constitutes revelation in this narrow sense. That does not mean that any part of the Bible is not inspired, or is 'less inspired' than any other part. Inspiration and Revelation are two different things, as we will see further in this lesson. The point being made, however, is that a good deal of what we read in the Bible is the recording of information readily attainable by the author using the normal means of knowledge. For instance, we read that Luke investigated the events about which he writes in his gospel and in the Book of Acts, conducting, as it were, journalistic interviews with the people who were eyewitnesses of these events. This is *not* revelation, though what Luke consequently committed to papyrus *was* inspired. The annals of the kings of Israel and Judah, as another example, were recorded in 'The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel,'¹⁶² available for all subsequent writers to read and record. Shedd comments, "The resurrection of Lazarus is established by the same kind of evidence as that by which the assassination of Julius Caesar is proved; namely, that of capable and truthful eye-witnesses."¹⁶³

This characteristic of Scripture derives, as we will see, from the human element of the process of 'inscripturating' divine revelation. It should not throw the student of the Bible into confusion or doubt, however, to realize that God employed intelligent human beings, *and their intelligence*, in conveying His nature and purposes to human beings. Nor is it difficult for the student to determine which parts of Scripture are direct revelations from God and which are the domain of human research and reason. Hodge writes, "No

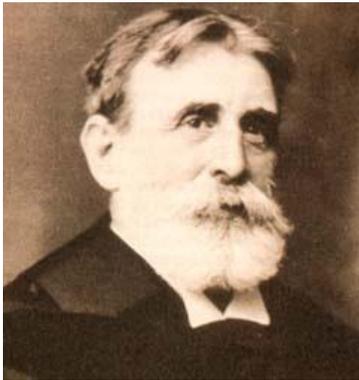
¹⁶¹ Shedd; 77.

¹⁶² i.e., I Kings 14:19, 29.

¹⁶³ Shedd; 118.

more causes are to be assumed for any effect that are necessary. If the sacred writers had sufficient sources of knowledge in themselves, or in those about them, there is no need to assume any direct revelation.”¹⁶⁴

This distinction does, to be sure, manifest a certain hierarchy within the biblical record. While not denigrating any portion of Scripture to the level of ‘unimportant’ or



Benjamin B. Warfield (1851-1921)

‘uninspired,’ it should be clear to any student of the Bible that the elucidation of the doctrine of justification by faith found in Romans Chapter 4, is of more importance to the life of the believer and the Church than the census of the returning exiles from Babylon recorded in Nehemiah Chapter 7. Van Oosterzie offers a challenging thought on this subject, one that should be considered carefully and not necessarily accepted in the form offered, “It would not,

therefore, necessarily follow that if we should have to be without some single portion of the Bible, we should have on that account lost some part of God’s Word. Holy Scripture is not the Revelation itself, but the source of our knowledge of it.”¹⁶⁵ While this statement does contain an important point, most evangelicals will be more comfortable with Warfield’s assessment,

The fundamental fact in all revelation is that it is from God. This is what gives unity to the whole process of revelation, given though it may be in divers portions and in divers manners and distributed though it may be through the ages in accordance with the mere will of God, or as it may have suited His developing purpose – this and its unitary end, which is ever the building up of the kingdom of God. In whatever diversity of forms, by means of whatever variety of modes, in whatever distinguishable stages it is given, it is ever the revelation of the One God, and it is ever the one consistently developing redemptive revelation of God.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Hodge; 155.

¹⁶⁵ Van Oosterzie; 168.

¹⁶⁶ Warfield, Benjamin Breckinridge; *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1967); 84.

In summary, revelation in the strictest sense refers to information conveyed by God to man, in a form understandable to man, and of a type that cannot otherwise be apprehended by man. It is the *communication* of information, but how can we be certain of its veracity? Therein we discover the difference between Revelation and Inspiration. "The object of revelation is the communication of knowledge. The object or design of inspiration is to secure infallibility in teaching....The effect of revelation was to render its recipient wiser. The effect of inspiration was to preserve him from error in teaching."¹⁶⁷

Scripture and Inspiration:

'Inspiration' is the English translation of the Greek word *theopneustos* (Θεόπνευστος), which literally means 'God breathed.' It is a combination word, typical in Greek philology, combining the words for 'God' and for 'spirit or breath.' The classic passage establishing the inspired nature of Scripture is, of course, II Timothy 3:16.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God (literally, God-breathed), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Inspiration is inseparable from Revelation, though the two are not identical and the difference important. Inspiration is the divine act that preserves the truth content of the revelation given from heaven, as well as the veracity of the knowledge derived from human investigation and reason. Thus inspiration elevates the research of Luke, for instance, to the level of the account of Creation: both historical events, but only one susceptible to human investigation and research. Both Revelation and Inspiration are an act of God within the mind of man, but in that their similarity ends.

Inspiration is like Revelation, in that it is a superhuman influence upon the particular person selected to be the organ of the Divine mind. But inspiration goes no further than to insure freedom from error in presenting that truth which has been obtained in the

¹⁶⁷ Hodge; 155.

ordinary ways in his men obtain truth; while revelation discloses new truth that is inaccessible to the ordinary human mind...Inspiration is more of the nature of superintendence; revelation is more of the nature of instruction and information.¹⁶⁸

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the doctrine of Inspiration to both the study of Bibliology and to the entire Christian faith. It is upon the fact of inspiration that the *authority* of Scripture rests, and it is upon the authority of Scripture that the life of the Church and of the believer is established. Lorraine Boettner writes, "But if the Scriptures are not authoritative, if they are to be corrected and edited and some parts are to be openly rejected, the Church has a much more serious reason [*sic*], and there can be no end of conflicting opinions concerning either the purpose of the Church or the system of doctrine which she is to set forth."¹⁶⁹



Lorraine Boettner (1901-90)

Of course it may be reasonably argued that there has been 'no end of conflicting opinions concerning the purpose of the Church' and so forth! Sadly this is true. But the cause of this controversy has not been, in most cases throughout the course of Church history, due to a disagreement concerning the *authority* of Scripture, but rather a disagreement concerning the *interpretation* and/or the *application* of that Scripture. In a sense not intended by Boettner, to be sure, the inspired authority of Scripture forms the basis for Church debate. For if the Scriptures were not viewed as authoritative, no one would bother to argue their interpretation or application thereof. Instead, it has been the regular practice of rabbis and theologians to say, as did Abraham Kuyper, "When Scripture has spoken, all contradiction ceases; when it has testified, the last remnant of doubt vanishes."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Shedd; 70-71.

¹⁶⁹ Boettner, Lorraine; *The Inspiration of the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; 1937); 10.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Berkouwer; 14.

The Inspiration of Scripture, like Revelation itself, is eminently reasonable and rational. What we are discussing here is the revelation of the Divine and Infinite Being, to created and finite Man. Add to the mix the corruption of human reason by sin, and it is fairly evident that a sure knowledge of God is not to be had through the medium of



G. C. Berkouwer (1903-96)

normal human intelligence or religion, even if the claim of divine instruction be made (as it has often been). Dagg seems to have his tongue firmly planted in his cheek when he writes, "The *character of God*, as exhibited in the Bible, cannot be of human origin. We know what sort of gods men make; for they have multiplied them without number."¹⁷¹ Without the reality of inspiration, the student of the Bible is as much at a loss with regard to revelation as the pagan. G. C. Berkouwer

writes, "Only God himself can give us definite and indubitable certainty and place us for time and eternity on an immovable foundation."¹⁷² Van Oosterzie adds, "the Word of God is literally that which God utters and reveals concerning Himself, and that Word is found *in* the Bible."¹⁷³

----- Unit 6b -----

The Elements of Inspiration:

This claim of biblical inspiration may be accused of being an example of *Deus ex machina*; that the Church has developed the doctrine of Inspiration in order to claim divine authority for the contents of her 'holy book' and forestall opposition from paganism and other religions. Believers respond simply by saying that inspiration is what Scripture claims for itself and while the reasoning is admittedly circular, the Church accepts it on the basis of faith. The internal evidence of inspiration appears in the "*thus saith the Lord*" of the Old Testament, which becomes the "*it is written*" of the New. With

¹⁷¹ Dagg; 28.

¹⁷² Berkouwer; 15.

¹⁷³ Van Oosterzie; 167.

regard to the writings of the Old Testament, we have the testimony of Jesus in reference to that which was written in the Psalm 82,

*Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods"'? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the **Scripture cannot be broken**), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"* (John 10:34-36)

And with regard to the teachings of the apostles in the New Testament, we have Paul's approbation of the Thessalonians, who recognized the divine authority by which Paul spoke,

*For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as **it is in truth, the word of God**, which also effectively works in you who believe.* (I Thessalonians 1:13)

Countless examples may be produced from both testaments of the self-attestation of the Bible to inspiration, to being the Word of God. The writings of Scripture were clearly viewed as authoritative by those whose lives and actions are recorded within its pages, and are justifiably considered as such by those who now guide their faith and their life by the same writings. The Church – at least the Protestant manifestation of the Church – freely acknowledges that its affirmation of the authority of Scripture is on the basis of that faith engendered within its members by the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, but this fact does not render either the reality or the plausibility of inspiration any less certain. Using a common but powerful metaphor, Boettner writes, "the reality of evidence is one thing, the power to perceive it, is quite another. It is no objection to the brilliance of the sun if it fails to illuminate the blind."¹⁷⁴ It merely follows from the reciprocity of revelation between God and man, the Infinite to the finite, that He grants the ears to hear what He speaks from heaven through His word.

This same phenomenon, which we have touched upon before, becomes apparent when we turn our attention to the *mode* of inspiration, the *how* of God's written revelation

¹⁷⁴ Boettner; 87.

through Scripture. Here we find that God not only reveals Himself in human words, He does so through the instrumentality of human writers. Yet this is done neither in a mechanistic way nor in an ecstatic manner. In other words, the Divine Mind does not overwhelm the human mind in such a way that the human ceases to operate, nor does the Divine Spirit so overtake the human spirit as to make the man insensible. Rather, the Church holds to the 'confluence' doctrine of inspiration: that the inscripturated Word of God is the product of both the human and the divine, working equally (not half and half) together to produce the Holy Word. This is what the Apostle Peter means when he describes the process by which Scripture has come into being,

*And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but **holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.***

(II Peter 1:19-21)

"Holy men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." That is the formula of inspiration that we have directly from the inspired Word. But by no means should this formula be interpreted as in any way diminishing either the humanity or the divinity of Scripture, for both are present in their fullest manifestation. The human writer was an active and participating medium of communication, not an automaton or mere 'pen in the hand of God.' *"The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet,"*¹⁷⁵ Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, signifying that even under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit, the prophets of God were never apart from their own rational faculty and judgment. The human feature is so apparent in the biblical writings that it has long sustained the charge by unbelievers that the Bible is purely a human book; no attempt was made by God to mask the instruments of His revelation, or to cloud their personalities in a mist of mystical spirituality. One of the most poignant examples of the 'humanity' of Scripture is found in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, where in the opening paragraphs he indicates his own forgetfulness with regard to his earliest ministry in that city. The passage is

¹⁷⁵ I Corinthians 14:32.

humorous in its manifestation of pure humanness, and becomes ridiculous when one attempts to dissolve the human element of revelation into the divine,

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

(I Corinthians 1:14-17)

Van Oosterzie points to this passage in refuting the ‘mechanical’ theory of inspiration, in which the human instrument becomes an unthinking tool in the hand of God. “To what absurdity it leads is seen, for example, by a glance at I Cor. 1:14-16, where, in the case supposed, the Holy Ghost dictated to the Apostle, first, an inaccuracy, then a correction, and finally a declaration of ignorance.”¹⁷⁶ The truth of the relationship between the human and the divine in Scripture is better stated by Shedd,

The ‘human element’ in Scripture means, that an inspired man in perceiving and conveying truth employs his own human mind, his own native language, the common figures of speech, and exhibits his own individual peculiarities, but without misconception and error upon the *subject* of which he treats, because his human mind is actuated and guided by the Divine Mind.¹⁷⁷

Charles Hodge adds,

Moreover, as inspiration did not involve the suspension or suppression of the human faculties, so neither did it interfere with the free exercise of the distinctive mental characteristics of the individual...The sacred writers impressed their peculiarities on their several productions as plainly as though they were the subjects of no extraordinary influence.¹⁷⁸

Yet as human a work as the Bible most assuredly is, it is no less divine, and attests to this fact in numerous places in both Old and New Testaments. For instance, the psalmist ascribes unchangeableness to God’s Word, as “*forever settled in the heavens*”

¹⁷⁶ Van Oosterzie; 171.

¹⁷⁷ Shedd; 103.

¹⁷⁸ Hodge; 157.

(Psalm 118:89) and the prophetic word from the Lord is promised to His people in Deuteronomy 18,

I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him.

(Deuteronomy 18:18-19)

The classic passage from the New Testament, of course, is II Timothy 3:16 already referenced, but it is evident from many other passages, and from the response of the people of God to the speaking and writing of the prophets and apostles, that the divine nature of Scripture was always apparent and accepted. As instruments the writers of Scripture were used according to their natures, their characters pervade the writings that flow from their styli; but the author of it all is God. "Though the Bible was written by inspired men, they are to be regarded merely as the instruments chosen, fitted, and employed by God, for the production of this work. God himself is the author of the Bible."¹⁷⁹ This fact has been acknowledged and held in sacred trust by the Church in all ages, though she has not always set the proper value on the divine word. "We do not separate the divine and human elements, but insist that the two are united in perfect harmony so that every word of Scripture is at one and the same time the word of God and also the word of man."¹⁸⁰

In recent times, in response to liberal attacks on the inerrancy and divinity of the Scriptures, Reformed and fundamentalist scholars have settled on the formula, "plenary verbal inspiration" to describe the divine character of the Bible.

The terms 'plenary inspiration' and 'verbal inspiration' as used here are practically synonymous. By 'plenary inspiration' we mean that a full and sufficient influence of the Holy Spirit extended to all parts of Scripture, rendering it an authoritative revelation from God, so that while the revelations come to us through the minds and wills of men they are nevertheless in the strictest sense the word of God. By 'verbal inspiration' we mean

¹⁷⁹ Dagg; 39-40.

¹⁸⁰ Boettner; 39.

that the Divine influence which surrounded the sacred writers extended not only to the general thoughts, but also to the very words they employed.¹⁸¹

As mentioned, the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration is relatively young in Church history, and arose in a time when the authority of the Scriptures was everywhere under attack within professing Christendom. But even the staunchest advocates of this doctrine recognize the problem presented by the various manuscript renderings of many passages and words in the Bible. We will have need and occasion to investigate the issue of textual criticism in the next lesson. Suffice it to say at this point that the doctrinal statements of most evangelical and fundamentalist churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries skirt the thorny issue of textual variants by applying the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration to the *autographs*, the original written forms of the various books of the Bible.

This phenomenon presents another, and also thorny, aspect of the divine character of Scripture: that of *Preservation*. We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit preserved the writers of Scripture from error in the areas of doctrine and history of which they wrote (inspired writers were not infallible in all areas of knowledge; there is no reason to expect the Apostle Peter to get a 100% on all of his Hebrew grammar exams). We also acknowledge that in this preservation God revealed to and through men *moved by the Holy Spirit* knowledge that was not accessible through the employment of normal human reason. Here we must also acknowledge that part of the work of the Holy Spirit since the close of revelation, has been to preserve the transmission of the Scriptures through the ages and across many languages and cultures. As we shall see in our discussion of textual criticism in the next lesson, it is evident to all students of Scripture (or even mere readers of most modern English translations) that the text of the Bible has not been maintained inviolate through the millennia: there are different readings and spellings of many passages to be found in the manuscript corpus available to translators. It did not please God to make sure that absolutely no mistake ever entered into the copying of manuscripts

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*; 12-13.

or the translation of texts. This fact does make the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration somewhat difficult to defend against detractors, and renders the view something less than a dogmatic certainty.

----- Unit 6c -----

The Elements of Scriptural Revelation:

Evangelical orthodoxy has quite properly and necessarily emphasized the authority of Scripture in all matters of doctrine and practice within the community of Christianity. This function of the Church and its teachers has become more critical in the current 'post-Modern' age, in which the concept of Truth is denied in any absolute form, and religion has become subjectivized within Western culture. Reformed theology has been at the forefront of this necessary and valuable revitalization of the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy. But, as with most things men do, the pendulum has often swung too far toward the other extreme. In wide swaths of modern evangelicalism, the Bible is treated as an ancient systematic theology, or as the source of innumerable proof-texts and 'refrigerator magnet verses.' What is gained in this effort is a critical revitalization of the authority of Scripture in the life of the Church and of the believer – something that apparently is required every four or five centuries, it would seem. But what has been lost in this process is the awareness on the part of the Church and the believer of the *historical* character of Scripture; that God revealed both Himself and His purpose in a manner intertwined with human history. This is in itself a feature of the special revelation of God in Scripture, no less than the doctrinal and dogmatic statements contained within. "Scripture has not been given to the church primarily as a study book for 'theology.'"¹⁸²

Thus we turn to the two overarching elements of Special or Scriptural Revelation as it is manifested in the Bible of the Old and New Testaments. First, the *historical*, and second, the *doctrinal* or *dogmatic*. It is a mistake at the very beginning to fail to realize either that these two aspects of Scripture exist, or that they abide in a mutually beneficial

¹⁸² Berkouwer; 11.

and supportive, *synergistic* and *symbiotic* relationship within the Bible as it is read, preached, and applied. It is not the duty of the theologian or the Bible student to thresh the historical narratives of Scripture in order to extract the doctrinal kernels of truth. Rather it is the duty of both to recognize, with ever-increasing clarity, the tapestry that is formed by the interweaving of historical and dogmatic threads that represents the ‘whole counsel of God’ in Scripture.

Van Oosterzie comments that the Holy Scripture “is the *documentary record* of what God has done, is doing, and will do to establish His kingdom on earth.”¹⁸³ What we are maintaining in this particular discussion is that ‘documentary record’ is not merely the vehicle in which the dogmatic truths of Scripture are carried, even less the packaging in which they are wrapped. Indeed, the historical narratives of Scripture are themselves dogmatic and doctrinal, as the redemptive purpose of God is revealed in them, as it were, in a living parable. “God’s revelation must not be seen as a timeless and supra-historical event but as a manifestation in history, and interest in this history and its relation to revelation is therefore perfectly legitimate.”¹⁸⁴ A most remarkable passage in this regard is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the author speaks of the entire Levitical sacrificial system as a ‘parable.’

*Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was **symbolic** for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience – concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. (Hebrews 9:6-10)*

The word translated ‘symbolic’ in the text above (NKJV) is, in the Greek, the word *parabolei* (παροβολή), which is usually translated just as it sounds: *parable*. The normal word used by the New Testament writers for that which is typical or symbolic is *tupos*

¹⁸³ Van Oosterzie; 168 (italics original).

¹⁸⁴ Berkouwer; 28.

(τύπος), translated in English as 'type.' It seems as though the author/preacher of Hebrews is saying something more in regard to the ministrations of the priesthood in the tabernacle/Temple complex: that what they were doing (and still doing in the author's own day, apparently), was a living witness to what God was revealing and finally had revealed in Jesus Christ. This concept of the historical narratives of Scripture functioning as 'parables' - no less historical for that - applies to such events as Creation, the Exodus, the Conquest and Settlement of the Land, the Davidic dynasty, the Babylonian Exile, and so on and so forth. In an interpretation of the Old Testament that would be viewed askance if done today, the Apostle Paul thoroughly allegorizes the historical narrative surrounding Abraham, his wife Sarah, and her maidservant Hagar, in Galatians 4.

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are **symbolic**. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar - for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children - but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.* (Galatians 4:22-26)

The New King James version again translates with the word 'symbolical,' only this time the Greek word is *allegoroumena* (ἀλληγορούμενα), from which we get the English word 'allegory.' Conservative theologians in the Church have perennially shied from 'allegorical interpretations,' since they are far more imaginative - and hence far more subject to error - than more strictly literal approaches to biblical interpretation. While the student of Scripture must indeed be careful, he must not miss the point that Paul is making in Galatians 4, and that is being made in this particular discussion: the historical narratives of the Bible are themselves forms of divine revelation, and as such contain doctrinal truths. Vine's Expository Dictionary offers this insert for the Greek word found in Galatians 4:24,

[Allegory]...formed from *allos*, "other," and *agoreuo*, "to speak in a place of assembly" (*agora*, "the market-place"), came to signify "to speak," not according to the primary sense of the word, but so that the facts stated are applied to illustrate principles. The "allegorical"

meaning does not do away with the literal meaning of the narrative. There may be more than one "allegorical" meaning though, of course, only one literal meaning. **Scripture histories represent or embody spiritual principles, and these are ascertained, not by the play of the imagination, but by the rightful application of the doctrines of Scripture.**¹⁸⁵

This phenomenon of revelational history serves as a safeguard in the modern context, against the 'cultural relevancy' and 'cultural interpretive' techniques whereby the actual text and clear teaching of Scripture is modified to 'suit' the modern cultural milieu. In other words, modern translators, interpreters, and pastors & teachers play fast and loose with the doctrinal teachings of the Bible by separating those teachings from their historical context. Shedd's comment from over a hundred years ago still applies, however, "The primary and secondary matter in Scripture, such as doctrine and history, are so indissolubly connected with each other, that uncertainty in respect to the latter casts uncertainty upon the former."¹⁸⁶ The proper approach to Scripture is not to ignore the historical element and attempt to transplant the doctrinal teaching from the biblical setting into the modern, but rather to investigate the biblical historical setting *to the greatest extent possible*, and to allow that historical setting to speak with the same authoritative voice as the doctrinal teaching. This is called the *historical-critical* method of biblical exegesis, and it has long been and should remain the standard of conservative evangelicalism.

We are given revelation from God in the Bible, but not – as quoted by Berkouwer earlier – for the purpose of doing 'theology.' As we have maintained throughout this study, the various forms of revelation are purposed by God to reveal God. "For He whom we can know only through his own utterances is a fitting witness concerning himself."¹⁸⁷ This He has done in Creation and in Man, the image of God. This He has also done in Scripture and in His Son, Jesus Christ. In our reasonable analysis – day by day – of each and all of these forms of divine revelation, we seek not to create a religion or even to defend one. Rather we seek to know God, wherein lies eternal life.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www2.mf.no/bibelprog/vines?word=%AFt0000087> (bold emphasis added).

¹⁸⁶ Shedd; 74-75.

¹⁸⁷ Hilary of Poitiers (c. AD 300-368), quoted by Calvin; *Calvin's Institutes*; 79.

Session 7 – The Bible: Text & Transmission

----- Unit 7a -----

The Canon of Scripture:

The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, a central facet of the redemptive process for the sinner, derives from a passage in II Maccabees, “*Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from sin.*” (II Macc. 12:46). The associated doctrines of indulgence and confession, the treasury of merit, dedication of masses for the dead, and the sacrament of penance, are all linked inextricably to a doctrine that is alluded to but once, in a book that was not accepted by the Jewish nation as *Scripture*. I & II Maccabees offer their readers an interesting account of a very dynamic period in the history of the Hebrew people, through the adversity of the inter-testamental period. Along with such books as the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, and Bel & the Dragon, Maccabees comprises what is known as the *Apocrypha*, a word that means ‘spurious’ or ‘factually suspect.’ These books (there are thirteen apocryphal books included in the Roman Catholic Bible) were considered of questionable authenticity and authority to the Jewish religious leaders at the time they were penned, and thereafter. But some fathers in the Early Church considered them to be of value, and slowly they adhered to the regular listing of Old Testament books, along with the New Testament books as they were written.

The point of contention between Protestant churches, which reject the Apocrypha, and the Roman Catholic Church, which accepts a large portion of it, is on the issue of the *canon* of Scripture. The word is a transliteration of the Greek *kanōn* (κανών), which “is generally defined as meaning measuring rod or line, a trustworthy norm immune to criticism.”¹⁸⁸ Thus the *canon* of Scripture constitutes those books of the Bible that are to be viewed as authentic and thus authoritative, and those books accepted as being divinely inspired are said to possess *canonicity*. “We thus ascribe Canonicity to a book in the Bible, which has a right to a place in the sacred collection; and this right again depends

¹⁸⁸ Berkouwer; *Holy Scripture*; 71-72.

- more than on anything else - upon the question of whether this writing really proceeded from the person to whom it has been ascribed by Jewish or Christian antiquity."¹⁸⁹ The implication of canonicity, to the ancient Jewish believer as well as to the Christian, is that the book thus purports to be, and is accepted as, inspired by God. Canonicity is not, it must be clearly noted, a *determination* on the part of the Church, that this or that book is divinely inspired. Rather it is a *recognition* of such inspiration already evident in the book itself. "That which determines the canonicity of a book, therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired of God."¹⁹⁰

Protestant churches admit a total of sixty-six books to the Bible: twenty-seven in the New Testament, and thirty-nine in the Old. The basic list of books for the Old Testament is the same as for the Jewish faith, though the enumeration differs to the practice within Judaism of combining such books as Ezra and Nehemiah, Judges and Esther, and the Minor Prophets (12) as one book. But where did the list come from in the first place? There is no evidence or claim for a divinely inspired 'Table of Contents' to the Bible, either among ancient Jewish rabbis or early Church Fathers. Several 'councils' are alleged to have historically determined the canon of the Old Testament, and later of the Christian Bible, but it is questionable whether one of these councils ever convened, and evident that the other councils merely recognized a canon already long in use. On what basis, then, can we say that Micah and Matthew are canonical, but Maccabees is not? This is the question we seek to answer in this first segment: the Text of Scripture.

The Canon of the Old Testament:

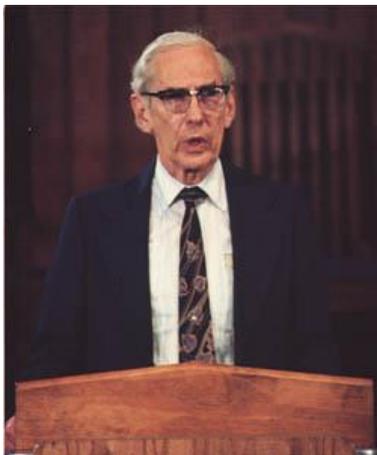
It is difficult to determine a single unifying principle whereby the books historically recognized as part of the Old or New Testaments, can be said to be authenticated. In each testament there are books of 'questionable' canonicity - meaning books whose right to be included in the Holy Scriptures has not always been recognized

¹⁸⁹ Van Oosterzie; 174.

¹⁹⁰ Young, Edward J. *The Canon of the Old Testament* in "Revelation and the Bible" edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1958); 155.

by all. *Song of Solomon* and *Job* in the Old Testament, and *Hebrews* and *Revelation* in the New Testament, are examples of such books that have ultimately been granted place in the Bible. In addition, there have been books – such as *The First Epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians* – once considered to be canonical, but ultimately left out. We can provide here only the most general of guidelines that seems to broadly authenticate a particular book as *canon* and warrant its inclusion in the Holy Writings of Judaism and Christianity. For the Old Testament, the central criteria is first, Moses, and second, the Prophets who illuminated and emphasized the teachings of God through Moses. For the New Testament this authenticating role is held by Jesus Christ, of course, and by the Apostles who afterward illuminated and emphasized the teachings of Christ.

That the centerpiece of the Old Testament, from an authorial and authoritative standpoint, is Moses is hardly subject to debate. In Malachi, the last writing prophet (and most likely the last prophet, period) of the Mosaic Era of divine revelation, we read the prophet's admonition, "*Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments.*" (Mal. 4:4). R. Laird



R. Laird Harris (1911-2008)

Harris, a noted 20th Century scholar of the text and transmission of the Scriptures, writes, "It is clear from the foregoing that regardless of what one may himself believe concerning the Pentateuch, ancient Israel believed that Moses wrote it as the spokesman for God...The principle for canonizing the Pentateuch which guided ancient Israel, as far as we have any evidence at all, is: Was it from God's great spokesman, Moses? The human author, admitted by all to be a spokesman for the divine Author, guaranteed

the writing."¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ Harris, R. Laird; *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Greenville: A Press; 1996); 158.

Within the Mosaic writings themselves we have the divine promise of future communications from God to His people, through the prophets. God through Moses lays down critical stipulations by which the children of Israel might know that a self-proclaimed prophet did indeed speak for God (*cp.* Deut. 18). One such criterion was that the prophet did not and could not derogate from the Mosaic commandments – the Pentateuch remained the touchstone of authenticity, authority, and hence canonicity of any subsequent writing. That the prophetic writers themselves recognized the role they were occupying as oracles of God, is evident from the frequently repeated formula, *“Thus says the Lord.”*

Within ancient rabbinic tradition a very significant role is also assigned to the priest Ezra of the post-exilic period. This great scribe is credited with assembling and collating the ancient holy writings that had been the possession of Israel since the time of Moses, into a complete corpus of ‘Scripture’ from which the newly reconstituted nation could be instructed. This process of teaching the people is recorded for us in Nehemiah chapter 8,

So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God... Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:4-6, 7-8)

It is significant in this passage that the ‘book’ from which Ezra read was already a recognized object of divine reverence and obeisance. In verse 6, after Ezra opened the book and blessed the great God, we read that *“Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”* There is no warrant for maintaining, as is done by many liberal scholars, that Ezra the Scribe ‘canonized’ the Old Testament Scriptures at this juncture. Rather it

is clear from the text that he was reading from an already acknowledged 'Holy Book,' resulting in the humble worship of the audience at the very opening of the 'book.'

What Ezra is more plausibly credited with is the assembling and ordering of the Old Testament Scriptures in the form that became traditional for Second Temple Israel to the time of Jesus Christ. It may also be that Ezra is the author of the books of I & II Chronicles, as well as being the scribe who collated the *canon* of Scripture into the traditional form: Law, Prophets, and Writings. This form is commonly known as the *Tanakh*, an acronym consisting of the first letters of the *Torah* or Law, the *Nevi'im* or Prophets, and the *Ketuvim* or Writings. Thus in the New Testament we read of the entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures often referred to as the "Law and the Prophets," an abbreviated, but well understood, form of the *Tanakh*. What is undoubtedly true is that the people and authors of the New Testament era inherited a corpus of writings long considered as divinely inspired, and long viewed as authoritative in matters of religion and of life.

Still, the process of critical review of the *canon* has continued for the Old Testament writings as it has for those of the New Testament. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in AD 70, the protection and preservation of the Scriptures became of vital importance to the Diaspora Jews. It is from this time that an alleged synod took place in Jamnia, a small village also known as Jabneh, in Palestine. "After the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai obtained permission to settle in Jamnia, there to carry on his literary activity. The place became a center of Scripture study, and discussions were pursued concerning the canonicity of certain books, namely, Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and



Heinrich Graetz (1817-91)

Esther.”¹⁹² It has become popular among liberal scholars – since the introduction of the theory by the German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz in 1871 – to maintain that the Old Testament canon was definitively set and closed at the ‘Synod of Jamnia’ in AD 90. This theory, however, lacks any concrete evidence that a

synod was ever convened by Rabbi ben Zakkai, or that any ‘official’ decision was rendered with regard to the canon of the Old Testament. Rather it appears that the rabbis who assembled at ben Zakkai’s school occupied their time in studying and discussing those books – essentially the same list as we have in our Old Testament today – that had long been recognized as canonical. It does appear that these discussions cast doubt upon the books listed above, but there is no evidence that ben Zakkai or his students ever proposed to remove them from the accepted canon of the Jewish Scriptures.

It is rather more likely that the Jewish historian of the same era, Joseph ben Matityahu – better known to posterity as Titus Flavius Josephus, or simply, Josephus – had a better handle on what the Jewish community of the Dispersion viewed as their Scriptures, than did a 19th Century German Jewish historian. Following the traditional format, and continuing the combination of books typical of the Jewish enumeration of their Scriptures, Josephus (c. AD 37-100) writes in apologetic *Contra Apion*,

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us disagreeing from and contradiction one another (as the Greeks have), but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all past times, which are justly believed to be divine. And of these, five belong to Moses, which contains his laws, and the tradition of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years. But as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.

¹⁹² Young; in *Revelation and the Bible*; 160.

And how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation, is evident by what we do, for during so many ages as have already passed, no one hath been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them, but it is become natural to all Jews immediately and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain divine doctrines and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them.¹⁹³

The Canon of the New Testament:

As Moses was the centerpiece of the Old Testament, so Jesus Christ is of the New



Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Testament. The 16th Century Reformer, Martin Luther, held that “the books of the New Testament had authority according to the measure in which they spoke clearly of Christ and of justification through faith alone.”¹⁹⁴ Of course, this view caused Luther himself to struggle with the book of James, which the German Reformer viewed as ‘a right strawy epistle’ due to his perception that James taught justification by works. Nonetheless, for our purposes, Luther’s viewpoint signifies a consistent trend among biblical scholars: the central personage and theme that one

finds unifying the books of the Old and New Testaments. Herman Ridderbos summarizes Luther’s position as normative for evangelicals of all time,

For a clearer insight into the meaning of the Canon of the New Testament it is of great importance to notice that the foundation for this Canon lies in the history of redemption itself, i.e., in what God has done in the coming and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. In other words, the significance of the Canon, as a distinctive and authoritative report of what happened ‘when the time had fully come’ and as an objective and fixed norm for faith and life, is given in the New Testament history of redemption itself.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Josephus; quoted in *Inspiration and Canonicity of Scripture*; 134.

¹⁹⁴ Ridderbos, Herman; *The Canon of the New Testament* in Carl F. H. Henry, ed. “Revelation and the Bible”; 190.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; 192.

The history of the 'development' or 'settling' of the New Testament canon of Scripture is again a history of recognition rather than designation. However, in the case of the New Testament as opposed to the Old, the role of heretics and heresy played a much more significant part in the establishment of an 'official' list of books considered canonical in the Early Church. The first step, though, was simple recognition by the contemporary community of believers that the writings of the Apostles were divinely inspired and to be held as authoritative in the Church. This much is acknowledged by the Apostle Peter with regard to the writings of his counterpart, the Apostle Paul,

*...and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also **the rest of the Scriptures**.*

(II Peter 3:15-16)

Later in the first century, and through the second century, the writings of the Apostolic Fathers – Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp – are replete with references from our New Testament Scriptures. This serves as a testimony to the acceptance of the apostolic authority and inspiration, in much the same manner as the many quotations of the Old Testament by New Testament writers does with regard to those earlier books. This again is an example of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture in general. The divine nature of the writings was self-evident, as well as self-attested, and it appears that no one saw a need in establishing an 'official' canon of Scripture. Second century writers quoted freely from the Gospels and the apostolic Epistles, according those writings divine authority to establish their own teachings, and fully expecting the churches to heed 'the word of the Lord' delivered through the Apostles.

But heresy struck early in the Christian Church, in the person of Marcion (c. AD 85-160), who denied that Yahweh of the Old Testament was the same God as the Father of Jesus Christ. Marcion did affirm that Jesus was the Saviour sent by the Father, and also affirmed that the writings of Paul were divinely inspired. He rejected, however, the writings of the gospels (except for portions of the Gospel of Luke) and the entirety of the

Old Testament. Marcion was denounced by such Church Fathers as Tertullian, but his own 'canon' motivated the Church of that time to develop one of their own. Thus it is evident that Marcion was the first to assemble an official list of canonical books, even though his listing was woefully incomplete and represented his false understanding of Scripture in general. Still, we give credit where credit is due, and assign to the heresiarch Marcion the inaugural role of writing an actual 'canon' of Scripture.

In response to Marcion's teaching, the leaders of the Christian Church of the 2nd Century began to include 'canon' lists in their correspondence to each other. Irenaeus (died c. AD 202) provides a list of New Testament books differing from our modern version by only Philemon, Hebrews, II Peter, II & II John, and Jude, with a notable question reserved for James.¹⁹⁶ The famous Muratorian Fragment (c. AD 200) contains a list identical to that of Irenaeus with the inclusion of II John, the deletion of *Shepherd of Hermas*, but the addition of *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Revelation of Peter*. It was not until after the legalization of Christianity by the emperor Constantine I that the list of the New Testament canon came to the form we know it today. Athanasius (AD 296-373) is the first whose extant writings include the complete New Testament canon, from Matthew to Revelation, that we now consider to be the closed canon.

That phrase, 'closed canon,' is another subject for discussion and debate. It touches upon an issue perhaps more important to the day-to-day life of the Church, especially in the 21st Century, than the historical analysis of the formation of the canon. Evangelicals accept the canonicity of the Bible as we now have it, but not all denominations agree on the issue of 'closure.' Technically they do, of course, but practically there is a great divide between, for instance, Presbyterians on the one hand, and Pentecostals on the other. The matter at stake is whether God is still communicating to His people through the same sort of revelation – prophetic and apostolic – that He did while the canon of Scripture was being formed. Conservatives say no; Charismatics say yes.

¹⁹⁶ Irenaeus did include the *Shepherd of Hermas* in his list as canonical.

Pentecostals believe that God communicates with His children in the same manner as a father communicates with his – informing, encouraging, admonishing, rebuking, etc. Due to the biblical relationship of the believer as a child of God, there is an *a priori* determination that God continues to speak to men in both the prophetic and apostolic forms; hence the Pentecostal denominations tend to continue these two offices into the modern age, and until the Second Coming of Christ.

There is a certain plausibility to this argument, based as it is on the intimacy of the relationship between the believer and God. But the nature of divine, biblical revelation is, according to Reformed and conservative theologians, not to be analogized to that of the father and child. Citing the biblical history itself, the conservative notes that direct communication between God and man was a rare occurrence beyond the Garden of Eden, both in regard to the number of men and women to whom God spoke directly, and the overall timeframe of such communication. Direct divine communication was sporadic indeed prior to the time of Moses, and since that time resided only in the occasional prophet raised up by God to instruct and admonish Israel. This phase itself closed with Malachi, and the Jewish nation, as represented by the intertestamental writings and summarized by Josephus, recognized the silence. To presume upon God speaking to any believer is to cheapen the whole phenomenon of divine revelation, and to thoroughly misunderstand what God intended and intends through that revelation.

Thus Herman Ridderbos, an excellent example of conservative Reformed scholarship, maintains that “it is of great importance to notice that the foundation for

this Canon lies in the history of redemption itself, i.e., in what God has done in the coming and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹⁷ The revelation of God historically follows the pattern WORD - ACT - WORD as it unveils, records, and explains the redemptive historical manifestation of His will. The first WORD is the prophetic, foretelling the ACT to come and giving the general signs for its recognition. Then comes the ACT itself, something that God does in and through history either typifying or full-



Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007)

filling an aspect of His overall redemptive plan. Finally, the second WORD follows with further explanation, admonition, and application of the completed ACT. This pattern is, of course, summarized more succinctly and eloquently in Hebrews 1,

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

(Hebrews 1:1-4)

The only way a conservative biblical scholar can accept continuing revelation is if he could be convinced that there was additional prophecy, divine activity, or explanatory instruction to be added to what God has already done in redemptive history, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The dignity of His person and the comprehensiveness of His work both demand that He remain the last WORD (and, for that matter, the last ACT) of God in history. The final explanatory WORD, therefore, belongs to those specially commissioned by the Lord to follow this full and final redemptive ACT: the apostles. “The apostles are Christ’s representatives, those to whom

¹⁹⁷ Henry; 192.

in a very special and exclusive manner he has entrusted the preaching of the gospel.”¹⁹⁸ There is no historical evidence that the Christian Church officially pronounced upon this matter and ‘closed’ the Canon. Rather it is evident from the writings of the earliest believers, and by the subsequent acknowledgement by all churches of the same canonical books, that the earliest Christians wished only to be guided by the authentic and authoritative word of the apostles as they testified to the redemptive work and grace of God through Jesus Christ.

This is not to be explained on the basis of a formal, ecclesiastical decision that had been preceded by deliberate reasoning and consideration. Much more the indication lies herein: that the Church had never wished to live by anything other than that which had been delivered to it as Canon by way of Christ, and that the Church, in order to be able to *continue* to do this, as a matter of course returned to and concentrated on a scripturally-fixed tradition. Herein also lies the real significance of the so-called ‘closing’ of the Canon in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁹⁹

----- Unit 7b -----

The Text of the Bible:

The study of the Bible as the Word of God does not end with the determination of the Canon, nor with the explanation of the nature and necessity of divine inspiration. Conservative believers are in agreement that the books of the Bible are ‘inspired and inerrant in the autographs’ – that the authors of Scripture were guided by God through the Holy Spirit, and thus guided into otherwise unknowable truths and preserved from error in all matters about which they wrote. But the modern believer faces an apologetical task in the presence of unbelievers, when challenged with the reality of many different ‘versions’ of the Bible, and with the undeniable fact that in absolutely no instance of biblical writing do we now possess the ‘autograph,’ the original document.

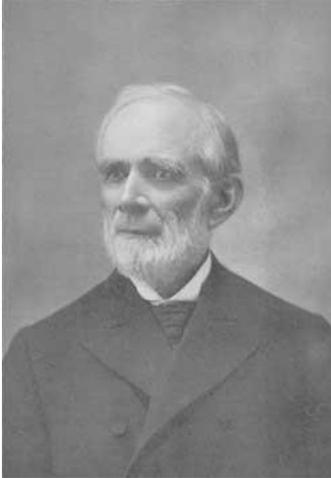
Some in the modern evangelical Church have compounded the problem by insisting on a particular ‘modern’ translation of the Bible as being the only acceptable

¹⁹⁸ *Idem.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; 199.

version of God's Holy Word, in much the same manner as the Roman Catholic Church long demanded that only the Vulgate be viewed as inerrant and infallible. The 'King James Only' perspective may succeed in defending the integrity of that particular English version as a good and able *translation*, but short of claiming that the translators themselves were 'inspired' by God, it cannot be maintained that any particular translation or version is infallible and inerrant. Plenary verbal inspiration does not apply, unfortunately, to the translations of copies of copies, and sometimes translations of translations of copies of copies, that we now possess. How can a believer be assured that the Bible he is reading is, in fact, the 'Word of God' when it is so far removed from the originals? Why are there variations in the available copies of the books and passages of both the Old and New Testaments? Is one particular translation of the Bible better than others, or is that determination negated by the fact that all are copies?

These questions bring us to the realm of Textual Criticism, which has derived a pejorative understanding among many conservative evangelicals due to the works of liberal, particularly German, scholars in the 19th Century. Their field was termed 'Higher Criticism' and must be differentiated from mere Textual Criticism. The former attempted to pass judgment upon the *content* of the Bible; the latter seeks only to determine, inasmuch as possible, the most accurate *texts* of the Bible to be used in translations. The two academic studies are often painted with the same 'liberal' brush, but there has been excellent scholarly work done by conservatives in the matter of analyzing and 'criticizing' the texts of the multitude of manuscripts now extant, covering all or parts of the Bible. Many of these scholars were professors at Princeton



William Henry Green (1825--1900)

Seminary (in the 19th Century) and Westminster Theological Seminary (in the 20th Cenetury). One such, William Henry Green, defined the function textual criticism as “to determine by a careful examination of all the evidence bearing upon the case the condition of the ancient text, the measure of its correspondence with or divergence from the exact language of the inspired penmen, and by means of all available helps to remove the errors which may have gained admission to it from whatever cause, and

to restore the text to its pristine purity as it came from the hands of the original writers.”²⁰⁰

Green’s definition is lofty and unattainable, and ought probably to be modified to say that the conservative textual critic seeks to restore the text *as closely as possible* to the original document written by the inspired author. Before we investigate the methodology and merit of textual criticism, it bears asking why God did not inspire the copyists and scribes through the ages in the same manner as He did the original authors of the text? Why did the divine wisdom permit *textual variants* to creep into the Bible, so that later generations would have to search and study to determine which reading is the most accurate? It is certainly not beyond the power of God to have preserved each and every manuscript without deviation or error from the originals; so why did He not do so?

Any attempt to answer this question must partake of more than a little conjecture. It is evident that God did not do so, for we do indeed have variations in the texts handed down to us from previous generations. The relatively few number and the doctrinal inconsequence of these variations does argue for a remarkable Providence in the preservation of the text through the ages, but variations there are nonetheless. For the essential message of God’s redemptive plan, from Genesis to Revelation, there is no

²⁰⁰ Westminster Theological Seminary; *The Infallible Word: A Symposium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.; 1980); 167n.

deviation caused by a textual variant between manuscripts. Thus we might say that God did 'inspire' the copyists and scribes in maintaining a remarkable purity of transmission, and the essential purity of the transmitted message. But this is probably not satisfactory to the unbeliever, and may not even be so for the believer, who is often tempted to doubt that the book in his hand is the true Word of God.

One plausible response to this query is that God did not absolutely preserve the integrity of each and every manuscript of the biblical books in order to prevent idolatry, an undue and harmful veneration of the *book* itself rather than the One to whom the book testifies. Abraham Kuyper formulated this explanation, reasoning that "such autographs would soon lead to idolatry, and it apparently pleased God to subject his Holy Scripture to the vicissitudes of time to ward off this evil rather than subject his church to the temptation of idolatry."²⁰¹ This explanation gains in plausibility when one



Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

considers the undue reverence with which some throughout history have viewed the Bible, be it the Vulgate or the King James Version. Furthermore, Kuyper's thoughts seem to be of the same line as the reason usually offered by theologians as to why Moses' body was removed and buried by the Lord Himself, so that no man knows where the human remains of the great leader of Israel lie. Still, it is conjecture only, though it reminds us that the omniscient God, who does all things according to His will and purpose, saw good reason to 'subject His Word to the vicissitudes of time.'

The essence of those vicissitudes is found in the manuscript evidence available to modern scholars and translators of the Bible. The science of Archaeology has contributed massively to the database of manuscripts, codices, papyri, minuscules, fragments, and other forms of whole books or just single verses, even partial verses, of the Bible as it was

²⁰¹ Quoted by Berkouwer; *op cit.*; 219.

copied and copied from one generation to the next. It can safely be said that the Bible is the most and best attested work of the ancient world in regard to the number and quality of the manuscript evidence available, by a huge margin over all other ancient writings. This itself is a singular testimony to divine Providence. It must be noted that the evidence is stronger and earlier for the New Testament than for the Old, but even with the Old Testament books the evidence is strong and numerous.

What is noteworthy with regard to the manuscripts of the Old Testament is the remarkable care that the scribes took to make sure each copy was as exact as possible to the document being copied. To do this, the Hebrew copyists counted pages, words, and letters, and made notations within the manuscript as to the middle word and the middle letter of a chapter or a book, often denoting them with enlarged script. "No other work of ancient times has been transmitted as accurately as the Old Testament has been."²⁰² Thus even though the earliest manuscript of the Hebrew text dates from around AD 900 – thirteen centuries since the last prophet – the agreement among the manuscripts is remarkable. Harris comments,

Upon inspection, these manuscripts show exceedingly few variations from each other; that is to say, they are all of one family, and have been meticulously copied from extremely careful copies of one standard type of text. Evidences of this careful copying are found not only in Jewish tradition but in the Masoretic notes appended to our Hebrew Bibles. The middle verse of a book is marked, the total number of verses is mentioned, the middle letter is indicated, etc. The scribes went to extreme lengths to avoid mistakes.²⁰³

The Masoretes were a school of Jewish scribes in the area of Tiberias, who devoted themselves to the 'rescue' of the Hebrew text from imminent obscurity. This danger was due to the fact that Hebrew is a consonantal language – its written form originally possessed no vowels, the vowel sounds were provided by the orator when the words were spoken. Over time the language devolved into written form only, with other languages such as Aramaic and Greek taking the place of Hebrew in conversation. As

²⁰² Westminster Theological Seminary *Symposium*; 159.

²⁰³ Harris, *Inspiration and Canonity*; 73.

with Latin many centuries later, this phenomenon essentially effected the demise of Hebrew. The Masoretes introduced 'vowel pointings' into the text of the Hebrew Scriptures to enable the words to be pronounced in a uniform manner as they were read, something that was critical to the synagogue life of the dispersed Jewish community.

The Masoretes' devotion to their scribal work is remarkable, without parallel or equivalent in literary history. In addition to the meticulousness with which they counted letters and words, noted the middle letter and word of every book, and so forth, they also provided many notations in the marginalia of their copies as to the nature of any previous variants, unusual accents or readings, and their commentary on which reading they preferred. But even if they felt a particular word was in error, they would not change that word in copy; they would note their considerations in the margin. "Their high regard for the text that had come down to them is evidenced by their placing in the margin readings they believed to be correct and leaving the text itself unaltered."²⁰⁴

When we turn to the New Testament, the picture is even brighter with regard to the proximity of the available manuscripts to the date of the original compositions. We have a multitude of full and partial copies of the Gospels and Epistles dating from the second century, with further quotations of New Testament passages in other writing that are within fifty years of the original. "The New Testament is the best attested book in antiquity in regard to its text."²⁰⁵ But of course the multiplicity of manuscripts of very ancient date has not precluded debate among scholars as to which manuscripts are the 'best,' the closest to the original in textual accuracy. The schools of thought in the modern era have divided into two basic camps: those who weigh the antiquity of a manuscript most highly, and those who weigh the plurality of common manuscripts as the best criteria. The former are known as the Critical School; the latter as the Majority School.

The Majority Text view, which adheres to the Byzantine text type as the most accurate to the original texts, includes those who believe the King James version of the Bible to be the most, if not only, accurate translation. The King James translators utilized

²⁰⁴ Westminster Theological Seminary *Symposium*; 146.

²⁰⁵ Harris; 69.

the Greek New Testament developed by the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus in the 16th Century. Erasmus utilized relatively few manuscripts, as only few were available to him, of very similar readings. This is fairly easily explained by the fact that over the vast majority of manuscripts now available to scholars there are very, very few differences, most of which involving a different spelling of a word. Thus it stands to reason that Erasmus, using what little manuscript evidence was available to him, would find essential agreement among those manuscripts. The problem with the text that Erasmus developed – known in his own time and since as the *Textus Receptus* or ‘Received Text’ – is not the agreement among the manuscripts he did use, but the large gaps in the manuscripts; passages translated with no manuscript evidence whatsoever. Thus the King James version rests on a paucity of manuscript evidence, and contains a number of passages with no manuscript foundation at all. When Erasmus lacked a Greek manuscript for a passage, he simply translated the Latin of the Vulgate back into Greek. His Greek New Testament, while still historically remarkable, could not benefit from the multitude of manuscripts later discovered.

One such trove of manuscript treasure is the discovery in the early 20th Century of what came to be known as the Byzantine text, due to its being found in the area of the ancient Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine text is a family of manuscripts that possess a very similar style of writing, and also possess a remarkable agreement among manuscripts. In addition, archaeologists during the 19th and 20th Centuries discovered several ‘codices’ – bound copies of large portions of the Bible – written in the Byzantine text type. The most famous of these is the *Codex Vaticanus* which, along with the *Codex Sinaiticus*, is one of the most complete manuscripts available from near the first century. Still, analysis of even these codices shows that the copyists used various different text types in different books of the New Testament, so the ‘majority’ is by no means preponderant.

This fact has led other New Testament scholars to argue for a ‘critical’ text of manuscripts dating from as close to the first century as possible. This school of thought lends greater emphasis to age rather than consistency among manuscripts, though it must

be admitted that the dating of any article of the ancient world is not an exact science. There is really no definitive argument in favor of one school or the other. A mistake can be made within a few years of the original text, and a mistake can be assiduously repeated through a vast majority of texts. "Although all our witnesses are substantially correct, all are nevertheless, to varying degrees imperfect or incorrect. We are required to make choices among the readings which they offer."²⁰⁶ What must be emphasized in this search for the 'best' text, is the statistical precision with which the text of the New Testament has been passed down through the centuries. Variations in spelling, or the addition or deletion of words or sentences (or even, as in the case of the last chapter of Mark's gospel, large passages) have no impact whatsoever on the unfolding of God's self-disclosure, of His redemptive plan, and of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The doctrines of the Trinity, justification by grace through faith, of ultimate judgment and the resurrection from the dead, and all other essential dogma of the Christian faith, are left untouched by manuscript variations.

The past and ongoing work of conservative textual criticism has been of inestimable value to the Church, giving her an ever-improving copy of the text of God's Holy Word. Believers need not fear the advent of a new translation simply because it is new. Indeed, to do so could possibly indicate a taint of idolatry toward the *book*. Yet in a manner analogous to John's admonition to "*test the spirits, for not every spirit is from God*" modern believers must also 'test the translations, for not every translation is from God.' Obviously it is beyond the ability of most believers to analyze ancient Greek uncials, papyri, minuscules, and codices to see if this or that modern translation is following the best text type. It is, however, within the ability of pastors – and often of church members as well – to read and study the underlying philosophy used in developing a new translation; the new corpus of manuscripts employed, the criteria used to select one reading as opposed to another, etc. In doing this the believer need not be nervous about the integrity of the Bible he or she has in possession: it is remarkably well-attested, and

²⁰⁶ Westminster Theological Seminary *Symposium*; 167.

this validation of the text only grows more sure with each new manuscript discovery. “So the net result of modern textual criticism of the New Testament is to show that we are very close to the originals, that the text has been exceedingly well preserved. It might be said that the worst Greek copies are almost as good as the best.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Harris; 66.

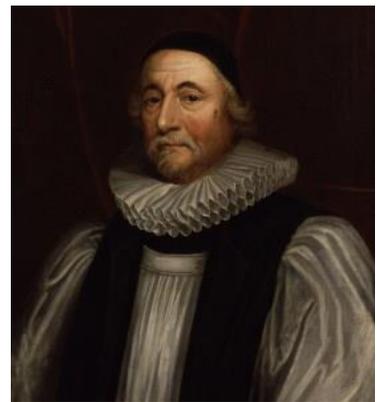
Session 8 – The Lord Our God, the Lord is One

----- Unit 8a -----

Defining God:

As we turn from the arguments for, and the nature of, the *existence* of God to an investigation into the *attributes* of God, we move from the Being to the definition of that Being. This is a very difficult step, and one of which many philosophers have declared man incapable of making. Herein we find the root of *agnosticism* as opposed to *atheism*; the former being much more prevalent in human intellectual history than the latter. Literally the word *agnostic* means a negation of knowledge: that which cannot be known. It is with acknowledged reasonableness, and often with admirable humility,

that philosophers have asserted that a definition of God is beyond human rational capacity: we may declare that God exists (*contra* atheism), but we cannot say what He is like. We have already asserted in this study that God is incomprehensible, so it stands to reason that some would further argue that the incomprehensible cannot in any way be described. Archbishop Ussher of the 17th Century Anglican communion, agrees in essence with this position,



James Ussher (1581-1656)

though he properly modifies his analysis to the attainment of a ‘perfect’ definition of God.

Forasmuch as God is in himself Eternal, Infinite, and incomprehensible, the first Cause of all Causes and Effects, there can no definition be given of him. Seeing every Definition is an Explication of the Nature of the Thing defined, by words expressing the material and formal cause thereof. But of the first Cause there can be no Causes; therefore no words to express them.²⁰⁸

Of course Ussher then proceeds to offer a ‘definition’ of the incomprehensible God based upon the self-disclosure provided by God via special revelation: Scripture. Yet it is wise for the student of theology to pause and consider what it is that he or she embarks

²⁰⁸ Ussher, James *A Body of Divinity: Being the Sum and Substance of the Christian Religion* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books; 2007); 26.

upon when treating of the 'nature and attributes' of a God described in the Westminster Shorter Catechism as "Spirit, Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable in being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."²⁰⁹ Caution is further warranted when the very nature of a definition is considered, much less the application of that effort to Almighty God.

"To define is to limit, to determine, to restrict; but the infinite must cease to be infinite in coming under the conditions of human thought."²¹⁰ When we define a thing, we do, as Thornwell intimates, place that thing under the auspices of our mind. This is difficult enough when the thing is finite and subject to analysis; it is impossible when the Thing is Infinite and majestic beyond perception. But in arguing for the existence of God we have already stated perhaps the most important 'definition' of the Divine Being: *existence*. That is a defining term in itself, and one that predicates all others. So while we proceed with caution, yet having already begun, we proceed.

Definition is a process of *negation* and *specification* through observation that is both *indirect* and *direct*. The farther removed the object from familiarity with human nature, or subordination to human nature, the more negative and indirect the definition becomes: we observe the effects of the thing rather than its inherent nature, and the greater part of our definition consists of statements of what the thing is not, rather than what it is. In the realm of Science, we find an example of this mental process in the analysis of Energy as opposed to Matter. The latter we can measure directly in the laboratory, the former we measure indirectly and consider it more in terms of what it is not. Needless to say there can be no conceivable object of our study farther removed from our own nature, and less subordinated to our sensory analyses, than God. We naturally possess a rudimentary knowledge of the Divine Being through His effects in Creation, a knowledge that, as the Apostle Paul asserts, renders all men 'without excuse.' This knowledge is basic and subliminal to all human thought and may be expanded and deepened in itself through

²⁰⁹ Westminster Shorter Catechism; answer to Question #4.

http://www.reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?_top=http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC_frames.html

²¹⁰ Thornwell; *Collected Writings, Volume 1*; 158.

the additional knowledge that comes only via special revelation. Only the redeemed hear the voice of the heavens declaring the glory of God (Psalm 19), though sadly many of the redeemed have ceased to listen to the music of Creation.

Negation and indirect specification are, however, insufficient for the searching human mind. It is not enough to say what a thing *is not*; we desire to say what it *is*. It is the search for positive definition that drives the scientist, and the very same search motivates the theologian as well. And if it is with great effort and many errors that mankind has extracted knowledge from being equal to or less than himself, how much more effort and care will be needed to come to a knowledge of the Infinite and Eternal? Furthermore, due to the qualitative difference between the Subject (Man) and the Object (God), the knowledge sought cannot be teased out through observation and experiment – cannot even be understood in finite human terms if it were thus observed – but must be revealed. *A priori*, revelation is the foundation of the knowledge of God. This fact places boundaries upon our study into the attributes of God, beyond which leads only to speculation, error, and idolatry. These boundaries can be summed up in two categories: the limitation of source material, and the humility of the finite being seeking to know the Infinite.

Of the first we read in Deuteronomy 29, *the classic verse for all who would be students of the nature and attributes of God. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may do all the words of this law."*²¹¹ God himself has set a limit to our search beyond which we may not go without peril to our minds and souls. The Apostle Paul cautioned the Corinthians to contain their thoughts within that which has been revealed through men like himself and Apollos,

*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us **not to think beyond what is written**, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.* (I Corinthians 4:6)

²¹¹ Deuteronomy 29:29

And the psalmist speaks eloquently and serenely about the peaceful state of mind that comes from holding one's thoughts within the proper boundaries of that which has been revealed,

*LORD, my heart is not haughty,
Nor my eyes lofty.
Neither do I concern myself with great matters,
Nor with things too profound for me.*

*Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul,
Like a weaned child with his mother;
Like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Psalm 131:1-2)*

The second boundary set by the revelation of God in Scripture is that of humility; the recognition that God as He is in Himself is beyond human comprehension, beyond the erudition of human thought and words, simply beyond reach. Two great doxologies come to mind in this regard: one from the patriarch Job, the other from the Apostle Paul. After holding forth on the majesty of God revealed in Creation and by His Spirit, Job exclaims,

*Indeed these are the mere edges of His ways,
And how small a whisper we hear of Him!
But the thunder of His power who can understand? (Job 26:14)*

And Paul cannot help but break forth (quite ungrammatically, too) into a song of praise as he considers just one small aspect of the 'greatness of the revelation' that had been granted to him,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33)

Nevertheless, these limitations on the scope of our investigation, and the infinite nature of the object of our study, do not mean that what knowledge we do attain is either false or chimeral. We recognize that God has condescended to reveal himself to Man in human terms, and to disclose himself by means of names and attributes that are familiar

to human thought and relationship. While we accept that such descriptions as God has given of himself in Scripture do not define Him as He is in himself, we recoil from the thought that these description, names, and attributes are a mere façade; that they are essentially untrue. To say that we cannot know God comprehensively is not to say that what we can know of God, we cannot know truly. This is especially the case as the source of all true knowledge concerning the Divine Being has its source only in the self-disclosure of God through Scripture. While God has revealed His nature to Man in terms which the human mind can grasp (though even here cannot fully comprehend) – terms like power, goodness, love – these attributes of the divine nature are not mere fantasies with no realistic correspondence to the true nature of God. Shedd writes,

The Divine attributes are objective and real, and not merely man's subjective mode of conception. We cannot say that we conceive of God as omnipotent, omnipresent, wise, good, and just, but that in fact he is not so.²¹²

We accept the veracity of the self-disclosure of God in Scripture not as a result of religious teaching, nor of wishful thinking, but of rational necessity. For if the revelation of the nature of God is made in terms not even remotely associated or corresponding to the actual nature of God, then it is a false revelation and is no knowledge of God whatsoever. And if the terminology used by God to disclose himself is itself incomprehensible to the human mind, then the disclosure is unknown and unknowable – even to the point of the existence of God. “An unknown God, a God of whose nature and whose relation to us we know nothing, to us is nothing.”²¹³ And of nothing man can say nothing, or even think nothing. This is indeed where we would be if our search for knowledge regarding the nature and attributes of God began within ourselves, and was formulated through the processes of our own minds.

But this is not true, if it pleases the Incomprehensible to reach out for us, the Infinite to speak to us concerning Himself in finite terms, the Absolute to come down to the relative.

²¹² Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*; 335.

²¹³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*; 343.

For in that case that that hear and believe His Word can positively know that He is, Who He is, and What He is. Then they at once know Him, and know that He is the Incomprehensible. Then they do not conceive of Him, yet the do conceive all that it has pleased Him to reveal to them concerning Himself. And in that knowledge of Him they have more than a mere philosophical conception: they have eternal life!²¹⁴

----- Unit 8b -----

Our God is One:

For millennia, Jewish worshipers have gathered to the morning and evening services of the synagogue to the sound of the men intoning the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4,

*Shema Israel,
Adonai Elohen,
Adonai Echad*

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Thus the Scriptures establish the unassailable principle of the oneness of God. This is the theological category of *monotheism*, of which Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are the three great world religions. But from all that has been set forth in regard to the existence of God, and the logic that is incorporated into the various 'arguments' in defense thereof, it is not unreasonable to state that monotheism is the only rational form of theism at all. Van Osterzee states the case in no uncertain terms,

This transcendental unity of nature is thus no property of God along with other attributes such as holiness, wisdom, etc., but the absolute condition of His whole existence. Genuine Theism cannot possibly present itself otherwise than Monotheism.²¹⁵

The monotheist, therefore, cannot begin in his description or definition of God at

²¹⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*; 35.

²¹⁵ Van Osterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*; 250.



Robert J. Breckinridge (1800-71)

any other point than this: that God is One. “The unity of the Godhead, the absolute oneness of his self-existent essence, is the fundamental conception of his being.”²¹⁶ In this quote, coming as it does from a Christian theologian, the term ‘Godhead’ is used, which alludes to the doctrine of the Trinity. We must deal with that crucial and biblical dogma in another lesson, for it clearly demands and deserves full and careful treatment. What is of greatest importance here,

however, is the oneness of God as opposed to all polytheistic notions of paganism and Eastern mysticism. Monotheism pervades the Old Testament Scriptures (*cf.* Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 4:35 as well as 6:4 quoted above; Isaiah 45:22-25 for just a sampling). Yet many modern liberal scholars maintain that the religion of Israel *evolved* into Monotheism; that polytheism is the earlier heritage of all mankind. Their argument is somewhat ironic, and completely unbiblical and unhistorical. The conclusion flows from an *a priori* belief in human evolution: that mankind progresses from a lower state of being – including religious conviction as well as intellectual thought – to a higher state over the course of generations. The irony is found in the fact that such consideration admits the superiority and purity of monotheism, something that modern liberal scholars are reluctant to do explicitly.

Such a view follows from a consideration of religion as being primarily the fearful response of primitive man to natural forces and life events over which he has no control, and against which he is often impotent. The polytheistic anthropology maintains that primitive man assigned numerous deities to the unknowns of Life and of Nature, and only progresses through incremental philosophical advancements to the idea of “one God to rule them all.” But as we have seen in earlier discussions, it was not the fear of Man that created God, but rather the existence of God that made Man fear. The biblical

²¹⁶ Breckinridge, Robert J. *The Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers; 1859), University of Michigan reprint; 225.

theological view is that Man, as he removed further and further from his original innocence, also further clouded his own understanding concerning Nature's testimony to one God. That one branch of the human race might be preserved from this corruption, and maintain the true understanding of Monotheism, is itself only rational if one posits the intervention of the One True God in preserving this knowledge of Himself. That is the biblical testimony.

Yet the essential nature of Monotheism to the discussion of the character of God must not be taken as an admission that all monotheistic religions are created equal. It is all too common in the West today, especially among politicians but also among liberal theologians, to find common ground between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity on the basis of their monotheistic foundation. This would do if we stopped here in our investigation of the attributes of God, and failed to progress further into the biblical self-disclosure of the Divine Nature. But while we readily admit that the oneness of God is essential to His being, and is nonnegotiable in any discussion of His character, we also maintain that there is so much more that God has revealed concerning Himself. And it is this further revelation that takes us beyond Judaism and Islam, and irrevocably separates Christianity into its own place. The God of the Christian *is not* the God of the Jew or of the Muslim. The fuller revelation of God's nature will make that point manifest.

Furthermore, the characteristic of oneness is not merely numerical, though it is at least that. As applied to number, theologians refer to the Divine Oneness as *Unity*. But this oneness also pertains to the quality of the Divine Nature, with reference to which it is called *Simplicity*. The Unity of God is the less complex of the two concepts, for "more than one self-existent and independent Being, more than an absolute Lord and sovereign are inconceivable."²¹⁷ Bavinck writes,

By [unity] we mean that there is only one God, that his nature renders impossible the existence of several Diving Beings, and, consequently, that all other beings exist of and through and unto him. Accordingly, this attribute teaches God's absolute oneness and

²¹⁷ Hoeksema; 72.

uniqueness, his exclusive, numerical oneness in distinction from his simplicity, which indicated the inner qualitative oneness of the Diving Being.²¹⁸

Though it sounds odd to say this, it is the Simplicity of God that is a far more complex concept, far more difficult for human rationality to grasp. Shedd defines the Simplicity of God as that which “denotes that his being is uncompounded, incomplex, and indivisible.”²¹⁹ Theologians refer to God as not having ‘parts nor passions,’ and that all that we consider in terms of characteristics or attributes of the Divine Nature are not modes of His Being, but rather are wholly God in each. This is evidenced by the fact that nouns are predicated of God as well as adjectives: so we find Him to be not merely holy, but Holiness; not only righteous, but Righteousness; not just true, but Truth; etc. In all revelations of the nature of God, He is present in the fullness of His immutable essence. Ussher answers the question, “What is Simplesness or Singleness in God?” thus, “It is an essential Property in God, whereby every thing that is in God is God himself. Therefore without parts, mixture or composition, invisible, impassible, all Essence.”²²⁰ Bavinck adds,

With creatures there is a difference between being, living, knowing, willing; there is a difference of degree among them; there are some creatures that have being only; others that have life also; still others that have a mind besides. But God is *one* in every respect. He is whatever he *has*. He is his own wisdom, his own life; being and life are one in him.²²¹

But true ontological simplicity is beyond the comprehension of man due to the fact of complete and utter inexperience with the concept. “The truth is, absolute simplicity is to us wholly unintelligible; it is only the negation of every form of composition”²²² When human reason encounters a concept that is incapable of direct analysis and definition, it often resorts to analogy, and that is what we do in regard to the Simplicity of God.

²¹⁸ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*; 164-165.

²¹⁹ Shedd; 338.

²²⁰ Ussher; 29.

²²¹ Bavinck; 168.

²²² Thornwell; 163.

It stands to reason that Man, being the image of God from creation, would possess a nature analogous to the Divine, though by no means identical. Thus we find in Man's composition an indefinable reality that is itself un-composed: the soul. This is not to say that the souls of all men are but one soul – that would be Greek dualism and not biblical Christianity. It is, rather, to say that within each individual man, the soul is simple as opposed to complex, and is equally the same everywhere within that man. That the human soul, as well as the Divine Nature, can be characterized under separate headings - intellect, will, ambition, emotion, and so forth – does not diminish the fact that the very same soul pervades completely and essentially the intellect, the will, the emotions, etc., of the man. Thornwell defends the analogy between the human soul and human characteristics on the one hand, and the Divine Essence and the Divine Attributes on the other,

If the simplicity of the human soul is not disturbed or impaired by distinct modes of consciousness, if it continues permanently one in the midst of the many, I see no heresy in supposing that something analogous may obtain in the infinite being of God, and that He reconciles variety with unity, distinctions with simplicity, in a manner which does not detract from His absolute perfection.²²³

This observation, and the analogy of the human soul, will come up again in the discussion of the Trinity. But remaining for now within the context of the Simplicity of God, as an aspect of the Oneness of God, we assert that this teaching precludes the separation or emphasis of any attribute of the Divine Nature as separate from, competing with, or higher than any other attribute. It is unbiblical idolatry to skew the self-disclosure of God in Scripture toward the attribute of Love and away from that of Justice; toward Mercy at the expense of Holiness; toward Immutability and away from the Incarnation. The complexity of the Divine Simplicity is beyond our understanding apart from the dim mirror of analogy, yet it follows logically from the reality that God is perfect

²²³ Thornwell; 164.

in all His being, and that He is essential in all His attributes.²²⁴ Breckinridge rightly deduces that a great deal of error in the Church might have been, and might be, avoided if believers kept the fundamental principle of the Divine Simplicity foremost in their minds.

It is because we fail to bear these profound truths in mind, that our views become perplexed on various questions, both speculative and practical; and many difficulties take their rise in the habit of considering and treating particular things, by themselves, as if they alone were to be considered and treated; and from dwelling only on a single attribute of God, instead of having regard to the method of all the divine perfections.²²⁵

----- Unit 8c -----

God is Spirit:

As we humbly and cautiously attempt to describe God, we are benefited in our investigation by the knowledge that creation itself came from His hand. This fact permits us to consider that the things which we observe, and of which we are at least somewhat aware, are themselves analogous to the Creator who fashioned them. It is not that Creation matches to God as an image in a mirror, but rather that the mind of God – which is one with His purpose and the essence of all His attributes – is reflected to some degree in the works of His hands. The pantheist errs not in thinking that God is in Creation, but in failing to understand that the relationship is indirect and not direct. This indirect but reflective relationship allows us to construct a biblical ‘definition’ of God using, as it were, the things we find readily to hand.

Here at the outset we are seeking to lay the most foundational principles concerning the nature of God, those upon which all else will build. The oneness of God – His unity and simplicity – are as the chief cornerstone to the theological edifice. The next building block comes in answer to the question, “What type of Being answers to such oneness?” What mode of existence would we find in a Being who is pure and

²²⁴ This will show up again in our subsequent discussion of the ‘omni’ attributes: omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.

²²⁵ Breckinridge; 284.

uncomposed, simple and unified in essence, without parts or passions? On the one hand, we are told in the Bible what sort of Being God is: “God is Spirit,” the Lord Jesus informs the Samaritan woman. But on the other hand, this stands to reason as well, for of all the forms of creation with which we are familiar, spirit is the most pure, uncomposed, and elemental. The very thought of a corporeal god, with a physical body bound and limited in space, should jar our sensibilities as it once did the more astute of the ancient Greek philosophers, though perhaps for different reasons. Though they had no true conception of God, they still recoiled from the idea that the Divine Being possessed a body.

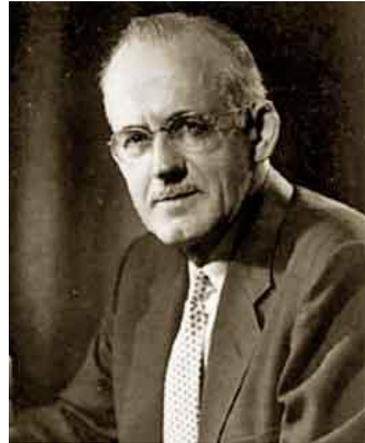
As the oneness of God seems to run contrary to the doctrine of the Trinity, so also the essential incorporeal Spirit that is God seems to contradict – or at least throw into question – the doctrine of the Incarnation. And as with the former, the latter conundrum will have to wait for more detailed discussion later. Again, we lay a foundation here; the walls and ceiling of the temple will come, Lord willing, later.

We have Jesus’ own testimony in John 4:24 that God is Spirit, but we also have the corroborating witness of many other passages in the Bible. In addition to these, we have the consistent prohibition, and consequent divine anger, against idolatry, the making of images purporting to be, or even to represent, God. The Second Commandment is explained and reinforced in terms of the incorporeal presence of Jehovah at Sinai,

*Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, **but saw no form**; you only heard a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might observe them in the land which you cross over to possess. Take careful heed to yourselves, **for you saw no form** when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth.*

(Deuteronomy 4:11-18)

The biblical prohibition against idols really only represents the crassest form of idolatry: the representation of the Divine Being in corporeal form. A. W. Tozer, in his classic *The Knowledge of the Holy*, gives what is probably the best definition of idolatry ever penned by uninspired man: “The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”²²⁶ We do well to realize that no pictorial or physical representation can be made of the incorporeal spiritual God, but that is not enough. That “the general mode of God’s existence, is that of an infinite Spirit,”²²⁷ must be the guiding thought that steers our conceptions of God away from any form or defin-



A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

iteness, any image – mental or otherwise – that would serve to concretize the Divine Being into human comprehension. In other words, and in the words of Karl Barth, God is ‘Wholly Other,’ and is thus truly incomprehensible to man. It is as Spirit that we find God at His most incomprehensible, and ourselves in greatest danger of attempting a formulation that would somehow set conceptual boundaries about Him and thus lead to idolatry.

The term ‘divine spirituality’ was used to indicate that God is a substance distinct from the universe, immaterial, invisible to human eyes, and without composition or extension. The analogy of our human soul serves to give us a vague conception of the nature of that immaterial substance. Man has, however, no direct or immediate knowledge of the essence of his own soul; we deduce a spiritual substance from the psychical phenomena which we observe; but the soul’s essence in and by itself escapes our observation.²²⁸

Therefore even the analogy of the human soul or spirit, while allowing us some degree of comprehension as to the concept of ‘spirit,’ does not raise us up to anywhere near a full comprehension of the Divine Spirit. In further describing God as Spirit we

²²⁶ Tozer, A. W. *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins; 1978); 3.

²²⁷ Breckinridge; 226.

²²⁸ Bavinck; 178.

find ourselves almost wholly within the negation side of definition: we follow the Scripture's lead in saying what God *is not* and in enumerating those limitations to which we are bound, but God *is not*. In himself God is **Pure and Invisible**, and as to His relationship vis-à-vis Creation, He is **Perfect and Immutable**. All of which attributes or characteristics flow from His essential nature of Oneness and are entirely consistent with the mode of His existence as Spirit.

To say that God is Pure is to say not only that there is no impurity or defilement in Him, which is true, but also to say that in Him "*there is no shadow of turning.*" That is, the Divine Purity is that of perfect light, for "*God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness.*" "He is the one pure beam of perfect light that reveals itself to us through the prism of His revelation in His manifold perfections and beauties."²²⁹ Furthermore, God is not pure *relative* to other creatures; He is Purity itself, relative to which all other creatures are defiled. Though coming from the lips of Eliaphaz, this assessment of God's purity is still accurate,

*What is man, that he could be pure?
And he who is born of a woman, that he could be righteous?
If God puts no trust in His saints,
And the heavens are not pure in His sight,
How much less man, who is abominable and filthy,
Who drinks iniquity like water!* (Job 15:14-16)

His fellow antagonist, Bildad, chimes in with the same thought later in the book,

*How then can man be righteous before God?
Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?
If even the moon does not shine,
And the stars are not pure in His sight,
How much less man, who is a maggot,
And a son of man, who is a worm?* (Job 25:4-6)

The point that Job's friends are making in these passages – a point that they were in the process of misapplying to Job – is that there is nothing in the created universe that

²²⁹ Hoeksema; 73.

can be considered 'pure' when compared with God. The Divine Purity does not merely differ in degree from all other conceptions of purity, but in *kind*. The degrees of purity we understand from the world around us, and which we also infer from the reality of corruption, are again analogies and living parables that permit us to conceive of a Purity that transcends all that we can imagine. Saying no more than that, we have properly defined the Purity of God. But there is another aspect of Purity that must be considered, though it has to do more with the manifestation of Divine Purity than with its definition: the essence of Divine Purity is Invisible.

Again, the nature of God as Invisible means much more than that He cannot be seen. This is true, of course: "*No man has seen the Father at any time...*" declares the Lord Jesus. The Spiritual God is analogous to Light: invisible yet illuminating. God as invisible means that the Divine Nature does not offer itself to man's understanding via the primary sense of intelligence, the sight. "[God], existing entirely above the limits of time and space, and - as a perfectly spiritual nature - invisible and incomprehensible for the creature, is in Himself beyond description glorious and blessed."²³⁰

We can hypothesize a reason for this - recognizing that there is no 'reason' for why God is what He is, He just is - in that the faculty of sight tends to be the most concrete of the five senses, leading to both the greatest degree of understanding and of error in human perception. Ebenezer Scrooge notwithstanding, we tend to believe what we see with far less questioning than what we hear, and with far more immediate 'faith' than what we taste, touch, or smell. Of course, man cannot taste, touch, or smell God either; but these faculties are generally considered secondary to sight, so that when the substance of God is denied to the latter, it is comprehensively denied to the former as well. Interestingly, though leading to a discussion beyond the current scope, man *can* hear God. Selah.

Purity and Invisibility are attributes of God in himself; as He relates to His creation, His existence as Spirit means that He is Perfect and Immutable. These two

²³⁰ Van Oosterzie; 256.

characteristics speak to everything that is left to be said from Scripture concerning the attributes of God: His holiness, His love, His power, His justice, etc. The two terms, Perfect and Immutable, are related, of course. It is because God is absolutely perfect in all His attributes, all His thoughts being of unsullied purity and perfection, that the thought of a change in Him is inadmissible. For change cannot happen to perfection unless that perfection is either made more perfect, an impossible movement which implies that it was not originally perfect, or it is made corrupt, which admits of the ability of perfection to diminish, another impossible thought. Whatever changes ceases to be that which it was, implying either an improvement or a corruption; neither can be properly conceived of the Divine One. Van Oosterzie ties this also to God's eternity, which is reasonable in that the divine essence is in all of the divine attributes,

Most closely connected with this eternity of the Divine Being is the *Unchangeableness*, in virtue of which every idea of modification in His form of existence is utterly excluded, since He *dwells* in eternity; so that His perfection just as little admits of increase as of diminution.²³¹

Thus Scripture consistently presents God as One who does not change, though the heavens and the earth should change and even pass away, yet Eternal God remains, "*from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.*"²³² Perfect and immutable constitute the most basic natural understanding of the human mind concerning the Divine Being, even within the consciousness of those who do not know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. "This conception of an eternal and immutable being is not produced by the senses, for every creature, also man, is changeable; but within his soul man sees and finds that which is immutable, better and greater than all those things which are subject to change. If God were not immutable, he would not be God."²³³

To sum up, we have established that the most essential statement that can be made concerning God is that He is One, numerically a Unity and qualitatively Simple and

²³¹ Van Oosterzie; 257.

²³² Cp. Psa. 102:26-28; Isa. 41:4, 43:10, 46:4; Deut. 32:39; John 8:58; Rom. 1:23; I Tim. 1:17, 6:16; Heb. 1:11-12

²³³ Bavinck; 147.

Uncompounded. As the self-existent Lord of the universe, God must be both whole and wholly perfect, without parts or complexity that would comprise His nature. Whatever is composed is created by that force or intellect which compounded it, and such cannot be conceived as applying to God. Yet God is a substance, meaning that He is *something* as opposed to *nothing*, and hence must possess a mode of existence. He must exist somehow, and that somehow is Spirit, pure and invisible in His essence, perfect and unchangeable in all His attributes. What we have thus far established is a Being incomprehensible to human reason inasmuch as man is completely without any experiential reference to such a Being. Yet the terms used in Scripture to describe and define God are comprehensible to man, as being analogous to things which we can understand. The Divine self-disclosure condescends to our frame, and speaks to us in human terms of that which is Wholly Other.

Session 9 – God is Spirit, Infinite, Eternal, & Unchanging

----- Unit 9a -----

Essence & Attributes:

Thus far the things we have said about God serve primarily to accentuate His incomprehensibility. He is absolute Unity and Simplicity whose mode of existence is Spirit. The human mind can form a reasonable conception of ‘spirit,’ but absolute unity and simplicity are beyond all experience, and therefore are defined almost wholly in terms of negation – what they are not. If concluded at this stage, the self-disclosure of God would be enough to instill awe and fear in man, but not love and worship. The human heart that is restless until it finds its rest in God, yearns for a more comprehensible grasp of the Incomprehensible. In the same place where we read that ‘God is Spirit,’ we read that He desires true worshipers who will *“worship Him in Spirit and Truth.”* The Spirit has been revealed; we long now for the Truth. Fortunately the revelation of God in Scripture, as well as the testimony of human reason and experience and of Nature itself, offers a broader view of the Divine Essence through what theologians term *attributes*. Tozer defines an attribute as “whatever God has in any way revealed as being true of Himself.”²³⁴

Theologians avoid the use of the term ‘characteristic’ when speaking of the attributes of God, in order to steer clear of any notion of division with the absolute qualitative unity, the simplicity, of God. We seek to understand God as He has revealed Himself in relation to Man, while preserving in our minds and in our pronouncements the unity of the Divine Essence, the Oneness of the Divine Being. Shedd writes, “The Divine Attributes are modes either of the relation, or of the operation of the Divine essence...The attributes are not parts of the essence...The whole essence is in each attribute, and the attribute in the essence.”²³⁵ Reading a definition of attributes from

²³⁴ Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*; 20.

²³⁵ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*; 334

another theologian highlights just how difficult it is to speak the truth concerning God, not 'going beyond that which is written' on the one hand, but on the other hand using clear and comprehensible speech. James Petigru Boyce succeeds on the first count, but perhaps not so well on the second,

The Attributes of God are those peculiarities which mark or define the mod of his existence, or which constitute his character. They are not separate nor separable from his essence or nature, and yet are not that essence, but simply have the ground or cause of their existence in it, and are at the same time the peculiarities which constitute the mode and character of his being.²³⁶

This somewhat convoluted statement is the honest attempt of a great theologian to contemplate the manner in which God has revealed himself to Man without violating the essential oneness of the Divine essence.

A Divine Attribute is, as Tozer puts it, 'something revealed as being true of God.' It is also something revealed about God that brings the incomprehensible Divine Essence into some contact with human rationality. In other words, God answers our questions concerning his nature in terms that are comprehensible in terms of our own. Tozer writes,

If an attribute is something true of God, it is also something that we can *conceive* as being true of Him. God, being infinite, must possess attributes about which we can know nothing. An attribute, as we can know it, is a mental concept, an intellectual response to God's self-revelation. It is an answer to a question, the reply God makes to our interrogation concerning Himself.²³⁷

It stands to reason that if God were to reveal himself to Man, He would do so utilizing human language, which He himself gave to Man. Thus one major limitation to the self-disclosure of God to Man is the limitation imposed by language itself. J. L. Dagg reminds us that "we should remember, that human language cannot express to us what

²³⁶ Boyce, *Abstract of Theology*; 65.

²³⁷ Tozer; 21.

the human mind cannot conceive, and, therefore, cannot convey a full knowledge of the deity."²³⁸

Yet even here we must be cautious, for God's accommodation to our finite understanding might be misconstrued to mean that 'attributes' are mere constructs, and not reality itself. This is the response of the agnostic and the nominalist, and represents the *zeitgeist* of post-modernism derived from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. But it is not the theology of Scripture, wherein we find the self-disclosure of God in straightforward terminology that is clearly intended to convey *truthfully* what it must convey *humanly speaking* concerning God. An insuperable objection to the nominalist perspective in this regard is that, if God were merely accommodating himself to human language in conveying concepts about himself which were not representative of his true nature, the whole of both theology and religion would be a fiction.²³⁹ But the most powerful refutation is found in the person of Jesus Christ, who "*being the exact representation and express image*" of the Divine Essence, was the most comprehensive revelation of the Divine Essence that mankind will ever get, or could ever want. The attributes we study in relation to our investigation of the self-disclosure of God, are the very attributes that are characteristic of the life and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus "the Divine attributes are objective and real, and not merely man's subjective mode of conception."²⁴⁰ Hodge summarizes quite eloquently,

Philosophy must veil her face in the presence of Jesus Christ, as God manifest in the flesh. She may not presume in that presence to say that God is not, and is not known to be, what Christ himself most clearly was. The doctrine that God is the object of certain and true knowledge lies at the foundation of all religion, and therefore must never be given up.²⁴¹

Accepting then the definition of a Divine Attribute as something revealed by God to be objectively true concerning himself, we continue our 'scientific' analysis of the

²³⁸ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*; 69.

²³⁹ This is, of course, a primary argument against post-modernist thought in general, for if human rationality represents no more than personal constructs, there can be no knowledge at all, only self-sanctified opinion.

²⁴⁰ Shedd; 335.

²⁴¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1*; 345.

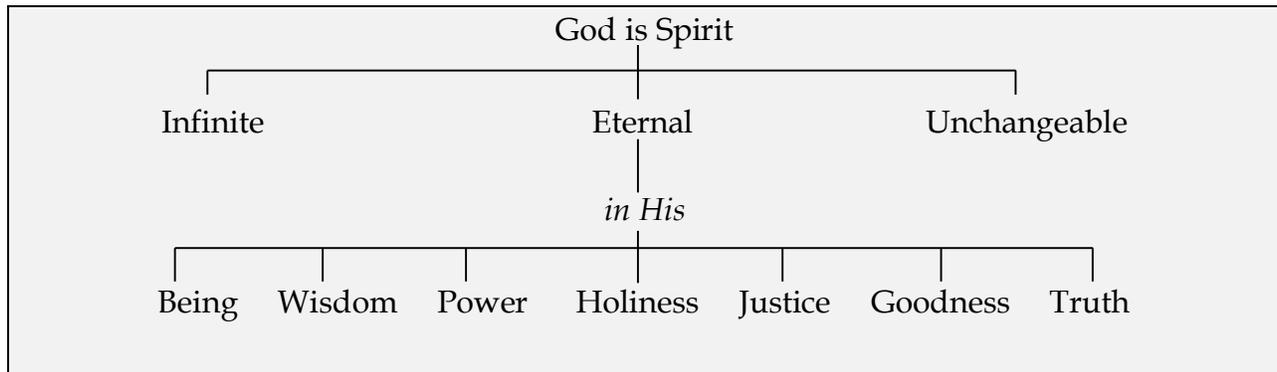
Person of God by 'categorizing' these attributes. It is not an overtly biblical methodology - nowhere in Scripture do we find the inspired authors listing the attributes of God in some sort of Linnæan system - but it is the way the human mind works in all forms of investigation, and should do little harm here. Theologians thus speak of two distinct types of Divine Attributes: **Incommunicable** and **Communicable**. These categories are somewhat self-explanatory, as Incommunicable Attributes are those that can be true only of God, in any sense or degree, while the Communicable Attributes speak to modes of the Divine Existence that are shared, albeit to a much lesser degree, by His creatures, especially by Man.

This conceptual division of the Attributes of God is in line with what the Scriptures teach us concerning both His *transcendence* - He is 'high and lifted up' and 'dwells in eternity' - as well as His *immanence* - that He also dwells 'with those who are meek in heart' and is a God who is 'as close to us as our God is this day.' The distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes also forms the framework of our understanding of biblical justification and sanctification. The first term and work reconciles sinful man to a Holy God who is Wholly Other; closing the gap between God and Man through mercy and grace because it could be closed no other way. The second term speaks to the regenerate believer being conformed into the image of God in Jesus Christ, a conformity that speaks to those attributes of the Divine Nature in which the human soul can participate.

Following this twofold systemization of the Divine Attributes, it is difficult to find a more succinct statement of the two types of attributes than the answer to Question 4 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "What is God." To this the catechism replies: "God is Spirit, Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable in His Being, Wisdom, Power, Holiness, Justice, Goodness, and Truth."²⁴² If we diagram this statement we can see the insight of

²⁴² Westminster Shorter Catechism;
http://www.reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?_top=http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC_frames.html

the Westminster theologians who developed such a profound answer, designed for the instruction of children and not for the disputations of the learned.



The first statement, *God is Spirit*, is the pronouncement of the mode of the Divine Existence, as we reviewed in the last session. It speaks to the Class of Being that is the One True God: *God is Spirit*. Then follows three *incommunicable* attributes of the Divine Essence: *Infinite*, *Eternal*, and *Unchangeable* or *Immutable*. These attributes belong to God alone; they cannot be shared, and no creature can in any way possess them in kind or degree. Finally we have a list of *communicable* attributes, though by no means an exhaustive list. These are modes of conception of the Divine Essence that are also conceivable as applying to man. To fallen man these attributes are corrupt and stagnant, but serve as irrefutable reminders of the Divine Creator whose image all men continue to bear. To regenerate man they represent both the promise and the goal of sanctification: conformity to the image of Jesus Christ, the perfect image and manifestation of the invisible God.

----- Unit 9b -----

Infinite in Space and Time:

These three attributes of the Divine Essence are understandably incommunicable, as no created being could possibly be infinite or eternal, and as all created beings experienced change through coming into being, and continue to change as a result of the succession of time. These are divine attributes, without which the divine would cease to

be divine; they are wrapped up, as it were, in all mankind's understanding of the term 'God.' But, speaking humanly, it may be said that the first - Infinite - has priority over the other two, for the latter derive from the former. In saying that God is not finite - that He is *infinite* - we are saying that He is immeasurable and limitless. With respect to time this fact entails *eternity*, which when coupled with the qualitative unity or simplicity of the Divine Being, logically yields *immutability*. James Henley Thornwell offers his own classification of the Divine Infinitude, showing the derivation of so many other attributes from this one.

Contemplated with reference to the grounds of His being, the infinite gives rise to the notion of independence or self-existence; with reference to the duration of His being, to eternity; with reference to the extent of His being, to immensity; with reference to the contents of His being, to all-sufficiency; with reference to the identity of His being, to immutability. Independence, eternity, immensity, all-sufficiency, and immutability are therefore the forms under which we recognize the distinctions which separate God by an impassable chasm from every work of His hands. These are the badges of Divinity - that glory which He will not and cannot give to another.²⁴³

With the Divine Attribute of *Infinitude* we begin to approach concepts with respect to God, that have some connection with our own rational mind. This is not to say that we can fully comprehend Infinity; we cannot. Nonetheless, it is significant to the discussion of God - from the arguments for the existence of God to the enumeration and elucidation of the attributes of God - that the finite mind of Man can *contemplate* Infinity. "We cannot, indeed, form a conception or mental image of an infinite object, but the word nevertheless expresses a positive judgment of the mind."²⁴⁴ We have seen in an earlier lesson that this very phenomenon is itself a powerful proof of the existence of an infinite being, for there is no other explanation for the extrapolation of the finite into the infinite in the human mind. It is an *a priori* to human rationality. We whose minds are encompassed by boundaries and limitations, recognize in the Deity boundlessness and immeasurability. And that is where we begin to tabulate the attributes of God, to gather

²⁴³ Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume 1*; 189.

²⁴⁴ Hodge; 381.

up the strands of revelation and weave them into a biblical theological fabric of understanding. Due to the Infinitude of God we realize that each attribute that we study is not only the fullness of the essence of God, but also that it differs from the coordinate characteristic in us, not merely in degree, but to an infinite degree, which is to say that it differs in kind altogether.

As the answer to Question 3 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism implies, the Divine Infinitude is the fount from which flows all of the communicable attributes of God. We recognize in ourselves characteristics whose source is the corresponding attribute in God: being, wisdom, power, etc. With respect to God, however, "Infinity is a general term denoting a characteristic belonging to all the communicable attributes of God. His power, His knowledge, His veracity is infinite."²⁴⁵ What God has revealed to Man as true in regard to the Divine Nature, is an attribute which pervades the entirety of the Divine Essence, through which the Essential God is manifested to creaturely understanding. The biblical expression 'fullness of God' speaks to this attribute of Infinitude, as it declares to the human mind the utter impossibility of setting limits or bounds upon any characteristic that God has condescended to reveal to man.

In God everything is original, absolute, perfect; in creatures everything is derived, relative, limited. Hence, in reality God is not named on the basis of that which is present in creatures, but creatures are named on the basis of that which exists in God in an absolute sense...We do not have a 'direct or proper idea' of God, but an 'indirect or derived idea,' and idea which is derived from the creaturely realm, but which, though inadequate, is not untrue, inasmuch as the creature is *God's* creature and hence reveals something of his excellencies.²⁴⁶

Immensity & Eternity:

The Divine Infinitude forbids us from considering any aspect of God in relation either to himself or to His creation, in terms of boundary or limitation. This means attempting to take the concepts that are commonplace to human speech and thought, and

²⁴⁵ Shedd; 339.

²⁴⁶ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*; 134.

mentally freeing them from the strictures by which they exist in our minds. For instance, the phenomenon of time is bounded in human thought by succession of events, by past, present, and future, by beginning and end. Space, as well, is measurable in inches, feet, and miles (or even light-years), bounded by matter, incapable of being occupied by the same object at the same time in the same way, and so on. Yet even with the necessary epistemological boundaries inherent in human thought, man can still go outside himself, as it were, and realize that very little is really known about such concepts as space and time. Charles Hodge admits, "The ideas with which we are most familiar are often those of which we are the least able to give an intelligent account. Space, time, and infinity, are among the most difficult problems of human thought."²⁴⁷ If not for the presence of the *imago Dei* in man, the application of concepts such as Infinity to other concepts such as Time and Space, would result in the mere generation of more words without meaning.²⁴⁸ As it is, we develop in our minds, even at a young age, the parameters of a thought, the shell of a truth, concerning *infinite* space and *infinite* time, and slowly the kernel of that truth becomes firmly planted within our minds as a mysterious reality, but a reality nonetheless.

Thus, when we make the application of Infinity to the concept of Space we arrive at the attribute of Immensity. This is but another definition by negation, for the word means 'beyond measure,' and when applied to the Divine Nature it means simply 'immeasurable.' In the vernacular, immense has come to mean 'very large,' but that is not how theologians use the term with respect to God. To say that God is Immense is not to say that He is very, very large; indeed, it is no more accurate to say that God is gargantuan than to say that He is infinitesimal, for the terms have no meaning to a Being who is immeasurable. It is also misleading to say, in the application of Infinity to Space, that God is *everywhere*. This is true, insofar as it represents God's Immensity in relation

²⁴⁷ Hodge; 380.

²⁴⁸ Except that, if not for the reality of the *imago Dei*, man would never bother to make such applications, for the concept of Infinity would never had occurred to him.

to the created universe. But Immensity is more than Omnipresence, or at least Omnipresence spatially considered as God being everywhere at once. Thornwell writes,

Omnipresence is His immensity considered in relation to his creatures. It is His presence to them; but as the created universe is limited, His presence, if He be infinite, must extend infinitely beyond it. He is where the creatures are, but He is also where creatures never are, never have been, and never will be.²⁴⁹

It is perhaps best to consider the Divine attribute of Immensity less in terms of spatial orientation, and more in terms of interpersonal relationship. This is a biblical line of thought, for it leads us to the characteristics of God being both *transcendent* and *immanent*. He is a God who is afar off, dwelling in Light inexpressible and full of glory, inhabiting eternity where no man can see His face and live. But He is also a God who is near, close to the one who is lowly and contrite of heart, near to His people and dwelling in their midst. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly contradictory concepts is the attribute of Immensity: God is both near and far off, for He is immeasurable and the terms 'near' and 'far' cannot limit Him as they do the creature. The words means something to us from our own experiences, and too often a definition of terms derived from human experience dictates our understanding of the same term or terms when applied to God. But the Divine Infinitude requires us to glean what we may from the creaturely language we use – for instance, that God is both *near* and *far away* – while holding back from making such terms determinative of His Nature as it is of our own. In other words, language does reveal to us something that is true of God *with respect to us*, but it cannot fully reveal to us what *He is in himself*.

The application of Infinitude to Time is, of course, the concept of Eternity. We know no more concerning Eternity than we do of Immensity; the human mind is in as incapable of forming a concrete mental image of the one as of the other. Eternity is often defined as timelessness, or as infinite duration, but neither concept is really any clearer

²⁴⁹ Thornwell; 194.

than the word they attempt to define. "A duration which is not time is as completely beyond our conceptions as a place which is not space."²⁵⁰

Time itself is a created entity, joined to the world at the beginning and associated with celestial markers to denominate the succession of hours, days, months, and seasons. The key term here is *succession*, for all human conception of Time involves succession and change, the movement of moments from one which will never be again, toward one that has yet to arrive. We call this the past, the present, and the future, but in reality there exists to the human consciousness only past and future, for 'present' is less than a wisp of time, with no more content than the infamous mathematical 'dot.' We are bound, however, to attempt to define Eternity in some manner as respecting Time, and this for two reasons. First, because we, as being created in Time – and Time being created for us – cannot help but think of that which is not Space as being relative to Time. It is the only other dimension with which we are familiar, and by which we can make some sense of the concept of duration. The second reason is that there is a relationship between Time and Eternity, as the latter is the application of Infinitude to the former. Yet as with the attribute of Immensity, we think creaturely thoughts that bring us to a point of understanding, and gaze into the unfathomable depths that are the very truth of the matter.

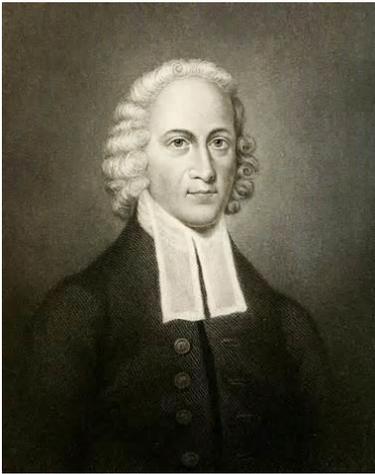
This phenomenon of words meaning something and yet not meaning something, at the same time, is illustrated by William Shedd's definition of Eternity: "The Eternity of God is his essence as related to duration. It is duration without beginning, without end, and without succession."²⁵¹ That sounds good, and it conveys to our mind a sense of meaning because it uses words that we can comprehend: one positive, duration; and three negatives, *without* beginning, *without* end, and *without* duration. But in reality the definition negates itself, for to our understanding, that which has no beginning and no end (a condition which also implies no succession), cannot be *duration* at all. But we work with what we have, grasping for a greater understanding of the Incomprehensible, and

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; 192.

²⁵¹ Shedd; 342.

appreciative of the fact that the words that we use do manage to bring us closer to the comprehension we know we can never fully attain.

Thus theologians speak of the Eternal God being in possession of the entirety of His duration simultaneously, whereas the creature comes into possession of his duration only gradually.²⁵² In this conception God possesses what Man cannot: the true



Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

Present. For the creature, the Present is nothing more than the Future disappearing into the Past, a concept that Augustine worked out with some dexterity over fifteen hundred years ago. But Future and Past are the same to the Eternal God, whose entire Being is Present. Shedd quotes Jonathan Edwards, "The eternity of God's existence is nothing but his immediate, perfect, and invariable possession of the whole of his unlimited life, together and at once."²⁵³ This is the thought that under-

girds such biblical passages concerning God knowing the beginning from the end, being the Alpha and the Omega, to whom a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.

The objection is made by those who deny the orthodox formulation of the Divine Eternality, that it employs unbiblical philosophical conceptions, that the Scriptures merely speak of God's existence being of immensely long duration. Often quoted in this regard is the frequent use by the writers of the Old Testament of the word 'everlasting.' For instance,

*Lord, You have been our dwelling place^l in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
Even from **everlasting to everlasting**, You are God. (Psalm 90:1-2)*

²⁵² *Ibid.*; 343.

²⁵³ *Idem.*

*The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty;
The LORD is clothed, He has girded Himself with strength.
Surely the world is established, so that it cannot be moved.
Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting.* (Psalm 94:1-2)

The proper response to the complaint, that the Jewish writers apparently knew nothing of the concept of 'eternity' as it is now defined by theologians, is to recognize the twofold nature of the language used. First, it is really no different than language used by any people with respect to a concept such as Eternity: the closest creaturely phenomenon to which an analogy may be drawn is Time, and so we utilize the terminology of Time to circumscribe our understanding of Eternity. With respect to the phrase "*from everlasting to everlasting*" Stephen Charnock comments, "thought the eternity of God be one permanent state, without succession, yet the spirit of God, suiting himself to the weakness of our conception, divides it into two parts; one past before the foundation of the world, another to come after the destruction of the world."²⁵⁴

The second aspect of the language used is that it is the *language of worship*. This is a vital point, for it represents the dividing line between true theology and vain philosophy. Our words are, and must be, insufficient to fully comprehend the enormity of the Divine Essence. But our words can and must always be filled with worship even as they approximate the reality that is the object of that worship. *God is Spirit, and He seeks for Himself worshipers in Spirit and Truth*. Theology, when it is at its truest and purest, always resolves into Doxology. Even in the necessary definition by negation, the note of praise and worship never departs from the lips or the pen of the theologian,

We deny to God beginning of life or end of days; we deny to Him succession of thought or change of state; we deny to Him the possibility of age or decay; He is neither young nor old. Beyond these negations we cannot go, but these negations impress us with the conviction of transcendent excellence.²⁵⁵

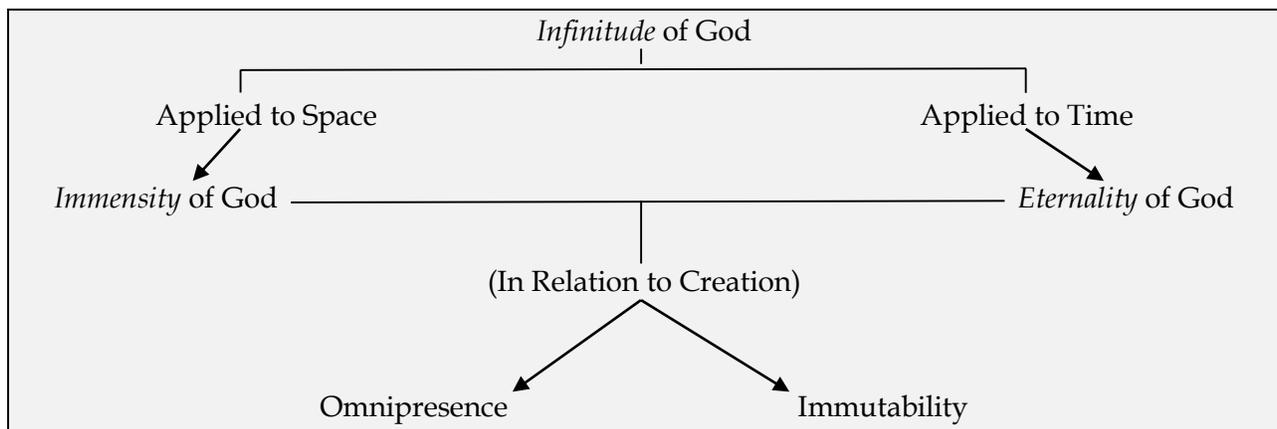
²⁵⁴ Charnock, *The Existence & Attributes: Volume 1*; 278.

²⁵⁵ Thornwell; 193.

----- Unit 9c -----

The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever:

Closely allied to the attribute of Eternality is that of Immutability, of Unchangeableness. This follows logically and theologically from the definition of Eternity as being the Divine state of immediate possession of all duration. "The doctrine of God's eternity, and that of his unchangeableness, are nearly allied to each other; and if his eternity excludes succession, it must also exclude the possibility of change."²⁵⁶ Immutability is a parallel attribute to Omnipresence: as the latter flows from the Immensity of God with respect to His creation, so the former flows from the Eternity of God.²⁵⁷ Thus all derive from the Infinitude of God, from which all our conception of the Divine Essence originate.



The essence of time is succession, and the manifestation of succession is change. Change can take place in one of three ways: change from a lesser to a greater state; change from a greater to a lesser state; or change between two states considered equal. In relation to all three the idea of change is impossible to God, for the first implies a God who is not perfect, the second a God who is corruptible, and the third a shifting God who may be 'perfect' but is not One. None of these considerations is agreeable to the most

²⁵⁶ Dagg; 65.

²⁵⁷ Shedd; 351.

rudimentary concept of a god, much less the biblical revelation of Jehovah. Tozer puts the matter simply, "To say that God is immutable is to say that He never differs from Himself."²⁵⁸ He continues,

For a moral being to change it would be necessary that the change be in one of three directions. He must go from better to worse or from worse to better, or, granted that the moral quality remains stable, he must change within himself, as from immature to mature or from one order of being to another. It should be clear that God can move in none of these directions. His perfections forever rule out any such possibility.²⁵⁹

In point of practical application, the doctrine of the Immutability of God runs entirely counter to the views of Process Theology and of Open Theism. Both of these historical aberrations of orthodox Christianity maintain that God is moving in the third direction: not from better to worse or worse to better, but from one state of knowledge to another, a *process* of maturing within the Divine Being, to whom the future is as *open* as it is to Man. We end the lesson by returning to a thought from earlier: that the fullest revelation and manifestation of the glory of God – indeed, the *fullness of the Godhead* – has been given to the world in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, of Whom Scripture testifies that He is "*the same yesterday, today, and forever.*"²⁶⁰ Nothing can be true of God that is not true of Jesus Christ, who is "*God blessed forever. Amen.*"

²⁵⁸ Tozer; 55.

²⁵⁹ *Idem.*

²⁶⁰ Hebrews 13:8

Session 10 – Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty

----- Unit 10a -----

Lord God Almighty:

When one studies the Attributes of God in the best of evangelical systematic, dogmatic, and devotional literature, it becomes readily apparent that no two writers hold to the same taxonomy when it comes to categorizing and classifying the manifold self-disclosure of God. There is, to be sure, wide and general agreement regarding the twofold division of Incommunicable and Communicable, but the order in which the Attributes assigned to each 'kingdom' varies from author to author. Charles Hodge begins the Communicable Attributes with *Knowledge*, moves from thence to *Power*, *Holiness*, *Justice*, and *Goodness*, ending his discussion with *Truth*. Stephen Charnock's classic treatise inserts *Wisdom* after *Knowledge*, and deletes *Justice* from his treatment, while Tozer's more devotional handling of the subject matter keeps *Justice* and adds *Transcendence*, *Faithfulness*, *Mercy*, *Grace*, *Love*, and *Sovereignty*. There is really no 'correct' way to list the Attributes, as they are supplied to us in Scripture in any particular order, but rather are woven into the fabric of the whole counsel of Divine Revelation.

But to the mind trained in Engineering, there ought at least to be a method to the madness; a rationale behind one particular grouping as opposed to another, and this is often lacking in both technical and popular treatments of the subject. Such organization, to be sure, comes entirely under the heading of 'hopefully useful,' and is not to be considered necessary to the understanding of the characteristics that God has revealed to be true of Himself. Thus far, in pursuit of a rational, systematic presentation of the Attributes, we have followed the Westminster Shorter Catechism answer to Question 3, at least up to its second line dealing with the Incommunicable Attributes of God. What follows, as regards the Communicable Attributes, is once again seemingly arbitrary: *Being*, *Wisdom*, *Power*, *Holiness*, *Justice*, *Goodness*, and *Truth*. The Catechism is not saying that God is less than 'Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable' in other Attributes, such as, for instance, *Love* or *Knowledge*; it just does not list them for some reason. Perhaps the best

reason why all of the Attributes of God are not listed by each and every author, is that there are so many, the volume would be interminable.

Thus any attempt to offer an exhaustive list of the Communicable Attributes would be well beyond the scope of this study, and would tend toward the tedious rather than the enlightening. What is sought, however, is an understandable framework from which to study all of the Attributes as they are progressively revealed in Scripture; a guideline to help in private study. As all true theology resolves in doxology, the pæans of Scripture should be a great place to start, especially those that most clearly address God as He has revealed Himself to be to Man. Two passages have been selected as paradigmatic: Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4, both recording scenes from the very throne room of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:

***“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!”***

(Isaiah 6:1-3)

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God... The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

***“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!”***

(Revelation 4:2-5, 8)

The awesomeness of God is displayed in these passages, and the fact that one is from the Old Testament, and one from the New, seems to show us that it is but One God, the same under both covenants, of which the inspired authors speak. They record the angelic song of praise before the eternal throne of God, and provide us with two essential attributes that lie at the very heart of worship: that God is *Almighty*, and that God is *Holy*.

To this we add one more, based on the testimony of Jesus and on the hope of our own hearts: that God is *Good*.

Power, Holiness, and Goodness are all communicable attributes in that something of each can be experienced by Man, though to an infinitely lesser degree than they exist in God. These three attributes furnish a logical systemization of the Communicable Attributes in general, for several reasons. First, they flow from worship of the Divine Nature, and each holds a unique place within that doxological structure: *Power* – God *Almighty* – induces **fear** of God, which is “*the beginning of wisdom.*” *Holiness* – the unsullied purity of the Divine Nature – induces **adoration** of God, answering to the greatest commandment, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.*” But the *Goodness* of God is no less important to the worshiper, for it induces **hope** – that settled persuasion that “*He is able to keep that which I have entrusted to Him against that day.*” From these three Attributes flow many, if not all, of the others revealed to us in Scripture.

From Almightyness...

...flows Omnipotence and Omniscience, Wisdom, and Sovereignty

From Holiness...

...flows Justice and Truth

From Goodness...

...flows Grace, Mercy, and Love

When we consider God as *Almighty*, the first thought that naturally comes to mind is that of Power – the *Omnipotence* of God. Hodge writes that “this simple idea of the omnipotence of God, that He can do without effort, and by a volition, whatever He wills, is the highest conceivable idea of power, and is that which is clearly presented in the Scriptures.”²⁶¹ Hodge then quotes several passages, again from both testaments, in support of this biblical self-disclosure of God’s Attribute of *Omnipotence*. From the prophet Jeremiah, for instance, we read “*Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens*

²⁶¹ Hodge; 407.

and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You."²⁶² And from the lips of Jesus Himself, *"With God all things are possible."*²⁶³ The unlimited power of God is a recurring theme within the Psalms, as well, songs of praise to God that they are,

But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. (Psalm 115:3)²⁶⁴

*For I know that the LORD is great, and our Lord is above all gods.
Whatever the LORD pleases He does,
In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places.* (Psalm 135:5-6)

It is perhaps the most profound biblical manifestation of God, that He is utterly and completely supreme in power, that there exists no other power greater than the Divine Omnipotence, that God is limited in His actions by absolutely nothing outside of Himself. *"He is the Lord. He does not conform Himself to any other, nor is the term obligation applicable to Him."*²⁶⁵ This truth has been widely recognized among philosophers and theologians, though even it has led to error on wide extremes. On the one side – that of Arminian theology – it is posited that God has *limited Himself* as to His sovereign power to save, in favor of the free will of sinful man. On the other side, it has been claimed that God's omnipotence is the supreme Attribute, and that which is Good and Right in the universe is so simply because an All-Powerful God has said it is so. Self-limited power on the one hand, arbitrary power on the other. Both are untenable with regard to the biblical witness.

As to the first, that God has voluntarily limited His sovereign power in election in favor of the free will decision of sinful man, we find no corroborating evidence in Scripture. Rather we read, *"I will have mercy upon whomever I will have mercy, and will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion."*²⁶⁶ The allegation that God has bound

²⁶² Jeremiah 32:17

²⁶³ Matthew 19:26

²⁶⁴ The opening verses of this Psalm are the *Non Nobis*: "Not to us, not to us, but to Thy name be the Glory..."

²⁶⁵ Hoeksema; 91.

²⁶⁶ Romans 9:15

Himself with respect to human free will stems from a philosophical view of free will as essential to the identity of human nature, and from the notion that only 'free' love to God can be 'true' love to God. These philosophical arguments are plausible, and carry the weight of conviction among multitudes of professing believers, but they are without support in the self-disclosure of God in the Bible. There we read of a God of supreme power, "*who works all things according to the counsel of His will.*"²⁶⁷

The second error is, at least, more in keeping with the biblical testimony concerning the Divine Omnipotence; that God's power is determinative of all other Attributes. The view acknowledges the supremacy of the Divine Omnipotence, allowing nothing to diminish the absolute power by which God accomplishes all His purposes. But it ventures into error and even heresy when it makes that power arbitrary, and subordinates all other attributes to it. The worst manifestation of the teaching comes from the Scholastic Theology of the Middle Ages, in which it was theorized that that which is Right is so simply because God said so; that murder would be right if God had declared it to be so. In other words, not only is God's power limitless, it itself limits all other manifestations of the Divine Nature. William of Occam (c. 1267-1347), famous for his 'razor,' was a leading proponent of this perspective. Hermann Bavinck summarizes Occam's teachings in this regard,

Occam taught that according to his 'absolute power' God can grant salvation apart from regeneration and that he can damn the regenerate; that he can forgive without having received satisfaction and that he can consider the works of sinful man to be sufficient and satisfactory; that instead of the Son the Father could have become man, and that the Son might have assumed the nature of a stone or of an animal; that God by a dispensation can exempt a person from obligation to any or all of the commandments of the moral law, etc.²⁶⁸

As incredible as such a view seems, it was not uncommon among medieval scholars, and was generally echoed by an equally famous theologian of the era, John Duns

²⁶⁷ Ephesians 1:11

²⁶⁸ Bavinck; 232.

Scotus (c. 1266-1308). In its modern form, however, it is found most commonly within Philosophy Departments of universities, and manifests itself in the allegedly thought-provoking questions like, "Can God create a rock that even He cannot lift?" All such speculation is both wrong and dangerous, separating and subordinating the Attributes of God in an unbiblical and irrational manner. Bavinck concludes, "This theory completely severs God's will from his being and from all his virtues; the will consists in absolute indifference or arbitrariness."²⁶⁹

The biblical truth concerning the Divine Omnipotence is that it acts in complete harmony with the manifold perfection of God's Nature, and not superior or anterior to it. The will of God is, to be sure, knows no opposition among the Creation; but the will of God is one with the purpose of God, which is itself guided seamlessly by the Omniscience of God. Thus the *Almightiness* of God pertains not only to His power, but also to His knowledge, as the *works* of God are in full concord with His *counsel*, which itself flows eternally from His knowledge and wisdom. God does not act arbitrarily in the outworking of His sovereign will, but rather is all-powerful "to work all things after the most perfect counsel, by the most perfect means, unto the most perfect ends."²⁷⁰ Far from being capricious, the Divine Omnipotence is itself guided, as it were, by the Divine Omniscience, which in turn is filled with the Divine Wisdom.

The Divine Attributes of Knowledge and Wisdom are communicable for the same reason as that of Divine Power – mankind has a share in knowledge and wisdom and can make a direct analogy between human rationality and Divine Omniscience. Yet once again the attribute is not like the analogy, for omniscience means far more than just 'all-knowing,' it pertains as well to the means of knowledge which in God are of a completely different kind than in Man. Bavinck explains,

Scripture teaches that God's knowledge is, in the first place, all-comprehensive; nothing is outside of the sphere of his omniscience; there is nothing that is not manifest in his sight; all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of him with whom we have to

²⁶⁹ *Idem.*

²⁷⁰ Breckinridge; 282.

do...Furthermore, this knowledge is not only all-comprehensive but also intuitive, i.e., it is not derived from observation, but it is an inherent possession. Our knowledge is posterior; it presupposes existence from which it is derived. Exactly the opposite is true in regard to God's knowledge; he knows a thing before it exists.²⁷¹

That these are not merely philosophical musings is shown by a number of biblical passages.

*Remember this, and show yourselves men; Recall to mind, O you transgressors.
Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done,
Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,'* (Isaiah 46:9-10)

*Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His.
And He changes the times and the seasons;
He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise
And knowledge to those who have understanding.
He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness,
And light dwells with Him.* (Daniel 2:21-22)

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

This perfect and comprehensive knowledge of "the end from the beginning" is what informs the Divine counsel and sets the purpose of God's will in infinite Wisdom. This is all, of course, humanly speaking, for in God there is no such process of thought to purpose to will to action - all are one in Him by virtue of His essential simplicity and unity. But as He presents Himself to man, He adopts the standard formulation of human rationality, with the caveat that that which takes place in succession in the mind of man, is an indivisible whole in the mind of God. It is this perfect Knowledge that guides the Divine Omnipotence toward the ends determined by His Sovereign and Wise counsel.

²⁷¹ Bavinck; 188.

This is the positive aspect of the manifestation of the all-powerful God, as Robert Breckinridge writes in a passage that might require a couple of readings to fully grasp,

Intellect and Will appertain exclusively to that which is spiritual; and Power is inseparable from our primary conception of Will, directed by Intelligence. When we add to this infinite spirit thus endowed, Wisdom and Knowledge as infinite as they, and all as infinite as the essence of which all of them are Attributes; we may be said to have as complete a conception as we can entertain of the sublime outline of God's *rational* nature.²⁷²

On the negative side, however, there do exist things that the Omnipotent God *cannot* do. "God cannot do anything inconsistent with the perfection of the Divine nature."²⁷³ For instance, He cannot *lie* (Hebrews 6:18); He cannot *deny Himself* (II Timothy 2:13); and He cannot *be tempted* (James 1:13). Furthermore, God cannot do the absurd. "The Divine power is limited only by the absurd and self-contradictory. God can do anything that does not imply a logical impossibility. A logical impossibility means that the predicate is contradictory to the subject."²⁷⁴ Hodge adds,

It is no more a limitation of power that it cannot effect the impossible, than it is of reason that it cannot comprehend the absurd, or of infinite goodness that it cannot do wrong...When, therefore, it is said that God is omnipotent because He can do whatever He wills, it is to be remembered that his will is determined by his nature. It is certainly no limitation to perfection to say that it cannot be imperfect.²⁷⁵

Man stands in awe and fear before the Omnipotent God; the unlimited power of the Deity instills terror in the Creature, nothing more, as is manifest throughout the history of man's own attempts at religion. "We are filled with awe in contemplating the omnipotence of God. When we hear the voice of his thunder in the heavens, or feel the earth quake under the tread of his foot, how do solemn thoughts of things divine fill our minds! From the rending cloud, and the quaking earth, let us look back to the power

²⁷² Breckinridge; 289.

²⁷³ Shedd; 360.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; 359.

²⁷⁵ Hodge; 409.

which brought creation into being, and forward to that display of his power which are to witness in the last day. Such a being, who will not fear?"²⁷⁶

----- Unit 10b -----

Holy, Holy, Holy:

But the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom; God intends that we should progress in wisdom. Not that we get beyond fear, for our God is a consuming fire, but that the wholesome fear of an omnipotent God be augmented with the knowledge of His Attributes which engender *adoration* in addition to *awe*. Supremely that love-inspiring attribute of the Divine Nature is *Holiness*. Holiness is also a communicable attribute, as we are both capable of and exhorted to holiness, "*Because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'*"²⁷⁷ Yet holiness is probably the least understood of all the communicable attributes of God, possibly because it is the least shared by man in general.

We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we can know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God's power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine.²⁷⁸

With regard to the Holiness of God, theologians pontificate on the definition of holiness as 'being set apart, consecrated, etc.' as if the rendering holy of man by God is comparable to the infinite Holiness of the Divine Nature. Holiness, as it pertains to the sanctification of a sinful being, is a goal set above the clouds, invisible and mysterious even as the Holy Spirit brings the believer progressively closer to that goal.

The Holiness of God, therefore, cannot be defined in terms of the progressive holiness or sanctification of Man. The former is original; the latter derivative. But because of the corruption of sin in the human heart, all connection has been severed between what man once knew regarding the Holiness of God, and what he now sees in

²⁷⁶ Dagg; 75.

²⁷⁷ I Peter 1;16

²⁷⁸ Tozer; 111.

himself. Stephen Charnock writes, "If any, this attribute hath an excellency far above the other perfections of God."²⁷⁹ And Scripture teaches us that Holiness is the necessary concomitant to the Omnipotence of God, as Moses sings in the Triumph Song,

*Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like You, **glorious in holiness,**
Fearful in praises, doing wonders?* (Exodus 15:11)

But what of an Attribute that cannot be defined? What can be said positively in regard to Holiness if we cannot derive meaning by way of analogy? Well, for one thing, what notion we have of holiness within ourselves – as a goal if not a reality – carries the unmistakable idea of *purity*. This, of course, pertains in infinite degree to the Divine Nature, as the prophet Habakkuk writes, "*You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness.*"²⁸⁰ Purity connotes perfection in all parts, even though we cannot use the concept of 'parts' with God. Hence theologians speak of Holiness as the 'sum of Divine Perfections,' or "His infinite, divine, ethical perfection, concentrated in and consecrate to Himself."²⁸¹ Breckinridge adds, though not explicitly in the context of the Divine Holiness, "For the highest perfection of God can be understood only of the union of all his divine attributes; that is, of the entire plenitude of the Godhead."²⁸² To most theologians, this *is* Holiness.

Two biblical metaphors that are everywhere closely related to the Holiness of God are Light and Fire. The Scriptures testify of a God who is a *consuming fire* and who *dwells in unapproachable light*, the connotation of each idea being a Deity whose absolute purity and perfection is too awesome for contemplation. God is, as C. S. Lewis so eloquently says of Aslan, "not a tame lion." Thus it is imperative that in all attempts to describe or define the Divine Nature, any gross familiarity be avoided rigorously. While the intimate names and designations of God are to be embraced and adored – Father, Shepherd,

²⁷⁹ Quoted by Shedd; 364.

²⁸⁰ Habakkuk 1:13

²⁸¹ Hoeksema; 94.

²⁸² Breckinridge; 282.

Comforter, and so on – the Divine Majesty must never be forgotten or diminished. In the presence of Almighty Holy God, Isaiah cried out *“Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips who dwells amidst a people of unclean lips!”* and the Apostle John simply fell down as if dead. Worship is invariably the effect of Holiness upon the child of God, not the abject fear of the pagan in the presence of an Omnipotent God, but the adoration of a believer before the glory of the Unapproachable One.

Two additional Attributes flow from the Divine Holiness: Justice and Truth. The Holiness of God is the foundation of Objective Truth and Absolute Moral Law, the purity of the Divine Being demands verity and justice in the universe. This is the reason we read that God *“desires truth in the inward parts²⁸³”* and enforced strict application of justice and equity among His people (though they rarely abided by His commandments on this score). This is a deeper understanding, or at least appreciation of holiness, as it moves beyond merely the absence of sin, to the attainment of purity of thought and judgment, the highest ideal for regenerate man: *“But be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.”²⁸⁴*

While we remember that there are no divisions or distinctions within the Divine Essence, yet we do well to make proper associations among the Attributes, those things that God has revealed to us as being true concerning Him. For instance, it would be an error to derive the Justice of God from the Divine Omnipotence, as if God operated under a heavenly ‘Might makes Right’ paradigm. God is not Just simply because He is all-powerful; this would again lead to the arbitrariness of Divine Righteousness, the ethical foundation of Divine Justice. Bavinck comments, *“In Scripture justice is not a property of God’s absolute Lordship but rests on an ethical foundation.”²⁸⁵* And Charnock recognizes the composition of that foundation, *“Divine holiness is the root of Divine justice, and Divine justice is the triumph of Divine holiness.”²⁸⁶* Thus God does not determine right from wrong simply on the basis of His ability to do so – the raw exercise

²⁸³ Psalm 51:6

²⁸⁴ Romans 12:2

²⁸⁵ Bavinck; 221.

²⁸⁶ Charnock, *Existence & Attributes; Volume 2*; 132.

of Divine Power – but because the determination is founded in ethical purity – that which is judged wrong is *wrong*, and that which is judged right is *right*.

All of this is to say that there exists a distinct and objective moral law, or code, or framework of righteousness by which the universe has been ordered and against which it is judged. It means that there is an absolute verity, a *Holy Truth*, that unites and unifies the moral creation and forms the only solid foundation for all lesser ‘truths’ as mankind seeks them through theology, philosophy, and law. To deny this fact is subversive of all morality, all law, and all human society, as we are frequently witness to in the annals of human history. So we say that Truth, as well as Justice or Righteousness, flow not from an arbitrary exercise of Divine Power, but rather from the blinding and burning purity of Divine Holiness.

He is the truth in all its absolute fullness. Hence, he is the ‘original truth,’ the source of all truth, the truth in all truth; the ground of all truth, and of the true essence of all things, of their knowability and conceivability; the ideal and archetype of all truth, of all ethical reality, of all laws and regulations, the norm in accordance with which all things should be judged both as to their essence and as to their manner of manifestation; the source and fountain of all true knowledge in every sphere, the only light in which we can see light, the sun of spirits.²⁸⁷

The Truth of God, flowing as it does from the Divine Holiness, fully subsumes every aspect of the Divine self-disclosure: All that we know from God is Truth, as opposed to the vain imaginations of the human mind. With respect to God’s relationship to His Creation, especially the rational portion of it, the Divine Truth is both foundational and functional. “The truth of God includes veracity and faithfulness: - veracity in his declaration of things as they are, and faithfulness in the exact fulfillment of his promises and threatenings.”²⁸⁸ The veracity of God exists eternally as the supreme and sublime standard of rectitude and righteousness in both the physical and the moral universe. It is the ‘force’ that the Star Wars movies attempts to duplicate, but without the ‘source,’

²⁸⁷ Bavinck; 202.

²⁸⁸ Dagg; 83.

God. Such an impersonal Truth is impossible, for the very nature of Truth is ethical and personal. By the same reasoning, however, subjective truth is also disallowed, as being a complete and destructive redefinition of veracity itself. As God desires truth in the inward parts of man, He sets himself to that end through the work of sanctification, *“Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth.”*²⁸⁹

We are told in our day that truth is fluid, conditional, and cultural. What is, in fact, fluid, conditional, and cultural is human comprehension of truth and human error. The recognition of the dignity of all men, and the consequent abhorrence of human slavery, is not a ‘new’ truth, but rather the overcoming of a very old error. The modern acceptance of ‘alternative sexuality’ is not a ‘new’ truth, but the exaltation of a very, very old error. In the passing of time – as it pertains, of course, to Creation as it does not pertain to the Creator – Truth does not vary, though man’s understanding of it and submission to it most certainly does. Throughout it all, however, the veracity of God is defended and preserved from the pages of Scripture by virtue of the Divine Faithfulness. One of the Apostle Paul’s ‘trustworthy sayings’ proclaims this aspect of the Divine Truth,

*For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;
If we endure, we will also reign with Him;
If we deny Him, He also will deny us;
If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*

(II Timothy 2:11-13)

The Omnipotence of God instills fear in the heart of Man; the Holiness of God engenders awe and adoration. Still, a Holy and Omnipotent God remains out of reach to sinful man, who may worship the intense purity of the Divine Essence, but can derive no comfort from either the Power or the Holiness displayed in the universe and in the Scriptures. A third categorical Attribute bridges the gap, as it were, and fills the believing heart not only with reverent fear and adoring worship, but also with deep comfort and a settled hope. This Divine Attribute is *Goodness*.

²⁸⁹ John 17:17

There is Only One Who is Good:

As far from the comprehension of man is the idea of Holiness, so close is the concept of Goodness. This is as it should be for an attribute that brings the transcendent Holy One into the hearts of regenerate believers. "The Goodness of God is the Divine essence viewed as energizing benevolently, and kindly, towards the creature. It is an emanent, or transitive attribute, issuing forth from the Divine nature, and aiming to promote the welfare and happiness of the universe."²⁹⁰ Goodness differs from the other Attributes, insofar as our conception goes, in that it is less an essential quality of the Divine Nature as it is an eternal disposition of the Deity. Dagg offers a general definition of the term, "Goodness implies a disposition to produce happiness."²⁹¹ Sadly, modern professing Christians tend to simply take this for granted with regard to God, due primarily to the fact that the Divine Attributes of Almighty and Holiness have been given short shrift in modern sermons and books. But when we begin at the fountain or headwater the Divine Attributes, as they are revealed in Scripture, we come to see just how unbelievably awesome the Goodness of God really is. It is the attribute that transfers true Christianity from a religion to a life, an abundant life.

As we are exposed in Nature and in Scripture to the Goodness of God, more and more as the years pass, it becomes ever clearer and more precious. From the Divine Goodness flows the 'comfortable' Attributes of Grace, Mercy, and Love, without which the necessary worship of God becomes a hard task indeed.

As the Goodness of God when manifested toward objects considered in their unworthiness, is called grace; and when manifested toward objects considered in their desirableness to God is called Love; so when that Goodness is manifested toward objects considered in their misery, it is called mercy.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Shedd; 385.

²⁹¹ Dagg; 76.

²⁹² Breckinridge; 300.

When Moses pleaded with God to reveal himself to him, the Divine Voice presented to Israel's leader both the Holy Justice of God as well as the Infinite Goodness of God, with the Goodness coming first.

*The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as ^lhe called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, **compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.**"* (Exodus 34:5-7)

Indeed, this passage presents us with the Divine Goodness in so sublime a manifestation that there existed no word in the English language with which to directly



Coverdale (c. 1488-1569)

translate the thought. The Hebrew word is *chesed* (חֶסֶד), and although the English word 'love' would be an approximation to its meaning, the early English Reformer and translator Miles Coverdale determined that a new word should be minted: *lovingkindness*. This new word better captures the intrinsic thought in *chesed*, that of a love that is full of compassion and grace toward an object wholly undeserving of the affection. It is the divine approbation, but it is so much more. For divine approbation does not derive from the object of love - sinful man - but rather from Goodness of God,

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us... We love, because He first loved us. (I John 4:10-12, 19)

The word 'lovingkindness' is a gracious word which describes the omnibenevolence of a gracious and good God. It is perhaps one of the most beautiful words in the English language, as it attempts to encapsulate one of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew language. It is the self-disclosure of God as Good, as Gracious,

Merciful, and Loving, that enables the sinner to believe that God is indeed for him, so that nothing could stand against him. It is the fount of all comfort and all hope, as well as all that is good and wholesome in this world.

His goodness is infinite, so that all other goodness flows out of him: and with unwasting fullness, all goodness dwells in him; and unto him, as the chief end, all goodness is referred, and of himself, in himself, and without himself – he is the eternal and unchangeable pattern and measure, as well as the only source of perfect goodness; so that not only is all Good essential and immeasurable in him as God, but as God creating, governing, and disposing all things, as God redeemed lost sinners, and as God judging the world, he sets himself forth to our apprehension and to our love as being the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely; persuading us, yea enabling us, to taste and see that he is Good, and to accept the blessedness that flows from him.²⁹³

It should be stated at this point, however, that the Goodness of God is a bone of contention among those who refuse to believe. Arguing from the presence of Evil and Suffering in the world, the agnostic and the atheist proclaim that either there can be no God, or that God cannot be Good. The answer to this contention has occupied minds great and small for millennia, and it is beyond the scope of a study in the Attributes of God to venture into theodicy. But it is sufficient to the point to simply note that the presence of corruption does not negate purity, it rather confirms it. Likewise the reality of Evil cannot be understood except against the backdrop of Good. It is merely the assertion of biblical Christianity that God is the Supreme Good from whom all that is good has both its source and its end. The reality of Evil does not speak against the Goodness of God; if it challenges any Attribute it might be either the Omnipotence or the Wisdom of God.

The Attributes of Almightyness – Omnipotence in all aspects of the Divine Being – Holiness, and Goodness flow into many of the other Attributes revealed in Scripture and Nature to be true of God. Significantly for the believer, however, is the way in which these three categorical attributes advance the progress of true religion: from fear, to adoration, to comfort and hope.

²⁹³ Breckinridge; 295-296.

Session 11 – The Names of God

----- Unit 11a -----

What's In a Name?

Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

(Genesis 2:19-20)

“*And whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.*” There is much more to this passage than meets the eye, and certainly more than most commentators find. The divine instruction to Adam, to name all of the living creatures, served two important purposes, both of which are germane to our discussion in this lesson concerning the names of God. The first purpose was to see if there could be found a ‘*helper suitable*’ for Man. Of course God knew that of the other living creatures there would none suitable for Adam, but it is evident that He wanted Adam to understand that for himself. Thus the process of naming the other creatures was one of *distinction*,



John Gill (1697-1771)

of separating and classifying the creaturely world as set apart from that which is human. The other purpose within this responsibility was that of *identity*: Adam did not merely give names that sounded nice, rather he named the living creatures in accordance with their essential nature. Adam’s naming of the animals is to be seen as a function of his capacity as co-gerent – as ruling in God’s stead and in God’s presence. John Gill, the renowned English Baptist preacher, writes in regard to this event, “which as it was a trial of the wisdom of man, so a token of his dominion over the creatures, it being an instance of great knowledge of them to give them apt and suitable names, so as to distinguish one from another, and point at something in them that was natural to them, and made them different from each other; for this does not suppose any want of knowledge in God, as if he did this to know what man would do, he knew what names man would give them

before he did; but that it might appear he had made one superior to them all in wisdom and power, and for his pleasure, use, and service; and therefore brings them to him, to put them into his hands, and give him authority over them; and being his own, to call them by what names he pleased.”²⁹⁴

Names do not mean today what they did at Creation, or through the course of history up to the modern era. A person’s surname, for instance, no longer indicates the occupation of the family, as it once did for the Bakers, Millers, and Coopers. Names today do not give honor to the individual’s father, as they did with the Ericsons, Johansson, and Stephensons of old. Yet names still serve the same function of distinction and identity – with more emphasis on the first than the second – as they did when Adam named the living creatures. This fact is still recognized and observed among a few of the religions of the world, particularly Islam, where converts take a new and different name to signify the change that has overtaken them, much as Cephas was to be called Petros, and Saul was to be known as Paul, due to their encounter with Jesus.

One of the reasons that names are not as meaningful in the modern world as they once were, is the general triumph of the philosophical school of **Nominalism** over **Realism**. From the time the medieval Scholastics like William of Ockham to the post-Enlightenment writings of Immanuel Kant, the notion of *universals* – abstract concepts underlying and substantiating the particular things that are named – has been under steady attack. Nomialist philosophers (Ockham) and their close cousins the Idealists (Kant), deny the reality of such abstract truths lying behind the names of things. It is rather the case, according to these schools of thought, that names are just what are given to things for the sake of convenience. In other words, we do not name things because that is what they are (i.e., Adam naming the living creatures), but things are what they are because we have so named them. Thus Anne Shirley (of Green Gables) can wish to be called ‘Cordelia,’ because she would so like to be called ‘Cordelia,’ not because ‘Cordelia’ has any meaningful significance, or at least any more than ‘Anne.’

²⁹⁴ Gill, John *Exposition of the Bible; en loc.*

Such a view, however, is quite detrimental to a believer's understanding and appreciation of 'names' as they appear in Scripture, and nowhere so much as with the 'names' of God. The biblical philosophy is decidedly *Realistic* in the sense that the names that are so often brought forward in textual relief, are indicative of truths that exist before and behind the name; the name is reflective of truth, not descriptive of it. "A name is an indication of the bearer, an appellation according to this or that attribute which he reveals and by which he may be known. Between the name and its bearer there is a certain connection, and this connection is not arbitrary."²⁹⁵

This is certainly the meaning of the text quoted above from Genesis 2, and is also the case of all such names in Scripture where the meaning is then given. 'Names' can often answer nagging questions with regard to a particular person's destiny before God. For instance, it is apparent from the biblical text that King Solomon '*left his first love*' and allowed his heart to be drawn away from God through the influences of his many wives and concubines. But did God reject Solomon ultimately and eternally? Certainly we cannot know for sure, as only God knows His own purpose for a man, but we are nonetheless given an encouraging word (at least as far as Solomon is concerned!) in II Samuel 12,

*Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon. Now **the LORD loved him** and sent word through Nathan the prophet, and **he named him Jedidiah for the LORD'S sake.***

(II Samuel 12:24-25)

The name 'Jedidiah' means 'beloved of the Lord,' or literally, 'beloved of *Jah*,' which is itself a very significant *name* of God. If we believe, as we should, that those upon whom God sets His love cannot be finally lost, then we would have to conclude that Solomon, in spite of his foolishness and apostasy, eventually returned to his God and was ultimately numbered among the redeemed. That is, of course, if we consider the name 'Jedidiah' to have *real* meaning, even prophetic meaning, and not to be a mere sentiment.

²⁹⁵ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*; 83.

But if we conclude the latter, the nominalist idea that names are matters of convenience without underlying truth, then we run up against the metaphysical background for the name given to our Lord: *Yeshua*, Jesus, “*She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*” (Matthew 1:21) Regardless of the philosophical debate, it appears evident that the Bible is *realistic* when it comes to names: there is meaning behind them, and they are revelatory of pre-existent truth.

Thus we approach the ‘names’ of God with the same understanding that we have gained in regard to God’s self-disclosure through Nature, Human Nature, and Scripture. That is, that God gives to us these ‘names’ in the manner of revealing to us some aspect of His Being, of His Nature. In a sense, it may be said of God’s Names what has been said of all other names, that they both *identify* and *distinguish* God from all other beings. But as God is indeed ‘wholly other,’ and is Himself self-existence and underived being, we must also recognize that the ‘names’ we are given are by way of *condescension*, and do not touch God as He is in Himself.

The *name* of God in Scripture does not designate him as he exists in himself, but in his manifold revelation and relation to the creature...Hence, the names which we use in mentioning and addressing God are not arbitrary; they are not mere inventions of our mind. Rather, it is God himself who in nature and in grace reveals himself consciously and freely, who gives us the right to name him on the ground of this revelation, and who has even made known to us in his Word the names which are based on that revelation. God’s names, therefore, have this in common: they are all derived from God’s revelation; there is not one name which is expressive of the being of God ‘in itself.’²⁹⁶

In himself God is ‘anonymous,’ literally, *without name*, for He is in need of no ‘distinction’ or ‘identification’ to separate himself from other beings, since He is eternal and self-existent Being. But in His self-disclosure to man, He is *poly-onymous*, ‘many named,’ since no one appellation can begin to adequately reveal His majestic and infinite Being. “[These names] are applied to Him because they contain a meaning which suits Him. They were assumed in condescension to our weakness, that we might be assisted

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; 85-86.

in coming to a knowledge of His being and His character.”²⁹⁷ The French Protestant theologian Francis (François) Turretin begins to classify these several names

into categories similar to the attributes we have discussed in previous lessons, “Some are taken from might – as El, Elohim; some from omnipotence and all-sufficiency – as Shaddai; some from loftiness – as Elion; others from dominion – as Adonai.” We will follow as simple yet as comprehensive a classification as possible here, dividing the names of God into two broad categories: the **Essential Names** – those that reveal to man something related to the *essence* of the Divine Being – and the **Attributive Names**



Francis Turretin (1623-87)

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those that manifest a more particular truth concerning God’s attributes in relation to His creatures. Broadly speaking, these two classifications correspond to the *incommunicable* and the *communicable* attributes previously studied.

----- Unit 11b -----

The Essential Names of God:

The first name of God encountered in Scripture is found in Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” The appellative given here is *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים), therefore we will also begin with this name. The placement of this particular name at the very beginning of special revelation, and in the context of Creation itself, serves to indicate that the name reveals the Divine Being primarily in relation to that Creation. In other words, the name *Elohim* signifies more of a relational aspect in the self-disclosure of God, than it does of the inner essence of God.²⁹⁸ With its immediate association to Creation, it definitely signifies God as *powerful* and *sovereign* – it is He who created all things; He is the only Eternal One, the pre-existent and uncaused Cause of all

²⁹⁷ Thornwell, *Collected Writings; Volume 1*; 143.

²⁹⁸ Bavinck; 100.

that is. Robert Louis Dabney theorizes that the name *Elohim* derives from the Hebrew root which means 'to be strong.'²⁹⁹ It is, he acknowledges, "the common term



R. L. Dabney (1820-98)

for God, Θεός (Theos), Deus, expressing the simple idea of His eternity as our Maker, the God of creation and providence."³⁰⁰ Without intending any irreverence, it may be said that *Elohim*, and its singular form *Eloah*, is the most 'generic' name of God revealed in Scripture. It is significant of power and authority, and is at times used with regard to angels and rulers among men, as when the Psalmist writes in regard to human princes, "I said, "You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High." (Psalm 86:82:6; a pas-

sage that Jesus quotes in reference to the infallibility of Scripture. Therefore it is important not to derive too much 'meaning' from the name *Elohim*, though there are a couple of important points that can be made in its regard.

The first is the fact that it is often found, as in Genesis 1:1, in the plural form, *Elohim*. Considering the staunch biblical position concerning the unity – the numerical and simple *oneness* of God, this is itself intriguing. It becomes more so when we realize that the plural form is used alongside verbs in the singular, as in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God (*Elohim*- plural) created (singular) the heavens and the earth," and Genesis 1:26, "And God (*Elohim*) said, 'Let Us make (singular) Man in Our Image.'" Theologians have, of course, argued for the evidence of the Trinity in such passages, though it is anachronistic to see the fullness of the Trinitarian revelation in Genesis 1. It is rather the case that the later revelation concerning the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit sheds light back upon the plural subject/singular verb phenomenon in the first book of the Bible. Parallel in this regard is the Baptismal Formula from Matthew 28:19, "...baptizing them in the Name (singular) of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In regard to this usage in Genesis, however, Thornwell's interpretation is appropriately cautious,

²⁹⁹ Dabney, Robert Louis *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust; 1996 reprint); 147.

³⁰⁰ *Idem*.

“The noun, too, is in the plural number; and while its concord with singular verbs indicates unity, its plural form indicates plurality.”³⁰¹

The second unique aspect of the name *Elohim* is its susceptibility to personal assignment by affixes. In other words, unlike all other names of God in Scripture, *Elohim* and *Eloah*, its singular form, are capable of being modified by personal possessive suffixes. In regard to this facet of the names, Breckinridge writes, “They differ also from all the preceding names of God in this remarkable particular, that they allow grammatical affixes at their end: which none of the other do, and which is wholly inconsistent with the Hebrew use of all proper names.”³⁰² This feature is notable in the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The form of the name ‘God’ in this verse is *Elohenu* (אֱלֹהֵינוּ), the name of God under discussion here, along with the first person plural suffix, ‘our.’ The reason for this particular feature of the name is not readily apparent from Scripture, nor is it evident from the form or etymology (which is itself subject to great debate) of the term. It may be that, being the most generic of names for ‘God,’ it is made capable of possessive suffixes in order to indicate that Israel’s God is the one, true God, as opposed to the idols (gods) of the heathen.

Similar in form to *Elohim* are the other common names for God: *El* and *Elyon*. They appear to be cognate, both possibly deriving from the Hebrew word for *strong*; the Semitic equivalent probably also being the root for the Islamic *Allah*. Some linguist maintain that the word for ‘strength’ derived from the ancient Ugaritic word for ‘god,’ and not the other way around; a point of view that does make sense. “The name EL, is used very commonly throughout the Old Testament scripture to designate God; and as far as I can discover, without exception, to express his power, greatness and majesty.”³⁰³ The most common occurrence of this Divine Name is in conjunction with other words, forming compound names of God, of men, and of angels. Thus we have *El Shaddai*, for God; *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, and *Samuel* among men; and *Michael* and *Gabriel* amidst the angelic

³⁰¹ Thornwell; 149.

³⁰² Breckinridge; 217.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*; 211.

host. The occurrence of this particular name is quite varied in Scripture, often referring to other 'gods' and even to men and angels, due to its most basic meaning of 'mighty one.' "When used of the true God of Israel, *El* is almost always qualified by additional words that further define the meaning that distinguishes Him from false gods. These other names or titles of God are sometimes called 'construct forms.'"³⁰⁴

Perhaps the powerful of such 'constructs' is where the name *El* is combined with its cognate *Elyon*, which is frequently translated 'Most High.' Alone, *Elyon* means 'supreme' and is used in modern vernacular for such institutions as the Israeli Supreme Court. It is in Scripture often combined with *El* and together, *El Elyon*, is God Most High. An example of the former, this name standing alone, is Psalm 9:2,

I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High (Elyon)

(Psalm 9:2)

And in construct with *El*, the benediction of Melchizedek, priest of God Most High,

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine; and he was priest of God the Most High. And he blessed him, and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God the Most High, who hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand.' And he gave him a tenth of all.

(Genesis 14:18-20)

Another important construct form of *El* is *El Shaddai*, which is usually translated 'God Almighty' in our English Bibles. The Greek Old Testament - the Septuagint - as well as the New Testament, render this Hebrew form as *pantokrator* (□◊■◆□⊗□◊◊◆◆□), which means 'ruler of all.' But the second term of this construct Name of God is of interesting lexical origin, and connotes more than just supreme rule. Indeed, the etymology behind the word does not seem to support the common English translation of 'Almighty' at all, but leads down other paths entirely. For instance, one lexical school of thought derives *Shaddai* from the Hebrew *shadad* which

³⁰⁴ http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Names_of_G-d/El/el.html

means 'to destroy' and renders *Shaddai* literally as 'my Destroyer.' This does highlight the absolute and irrepressible power of God, to be sure, but the usage of the name *Shaddai*, as well as the construct *El Shaddai*, does not tend to support such a violent translation. *Shaddai* may derive from *sadu*, which means 'mountain.' This would trace the origin of the particular name of God to the ancient practice of worshiping gods on mountains, as the Israelites did at Mt. Sinai, and as the Samaritan woman still maintained to be the proper practice on Mt. Gerazim. But God makes it clear in the biblical narrative that He is not merely a 'god of the mountains' but also of the valleys as well, so it does not appear that He would limit such a self-disclosure to a topographical feature of the earth.

Perhaps the most intriguing possible etymological origin of *Shaddai* is *shad*, which is a masculine noun that signifies the female breast (the Hebrew language does that a lot). Such a designation has been almost anathema to theologians throughout Church history, dominated primarily by men, and remains so today in the face of an insurgent feminist theology within professing Christendom. But it need not offend, for God being the source of all being, must be equally the source of femininity as of masculinity. This connotation would speak to God as the source of all nourishment and comfort, the 'feeding one,' literally, the '*full breasted One*.' There is no base sensuality here, but rather the recognition that the Most High is also the Sufficient One, in whom man may and must find his all in all. Listen to the psalmist in this regard, and determine if this possible etymological connection between *Shaddai* and *shad* is not reasonable.

*He who dwells in the shelter of the **Most High** (Elyon)
Will abide in the shadow of the **Almighty** (Shaddai).
I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
My God, in whom I trust!"
For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper
And from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with His pinions,
And under His wings you may seek refuge;
His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.* (Psalm 91:1-4)

Two Names of God are given in the first verse, which are then elaborated in the next three verses. Verse 2 speaks of the Most High under whom one takes refuge, as a strong tower, a fortress. Verse 3 transitions from personal to physical dangers, from the trapper to the pestilence, and leads in to the more nurturing care of a hen or hawk protecting its young under its wings or pinions. One is reminded of our Lord's lament over Jerusalem, spoken from the lips of the incarnate *Shaddai*,

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

(Matthew 23:37)

Of all the essential names of God, however, there is one that is most unique to Israel's God, the God of the Bible who reveals himself 'by Name' to His covenant people: YHWH – the tetragrammaton, the "Memorial Name" of God forever. We encounter it in the most natural of places: an answer to Moses' question as to who he should say had sent him to deliver the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt,

Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

(Exodus 3:14-15)

This passage represents the clearest and most profound self-disclosure of God in terms of a *name*, "Who shall I say has sent me?...I AM has sent me to you." This Name is derived from the Hebrew form of the verb 'to be,' though Breckinridge wisely comments, "it might with equal, perhaps greater reason be said, that the Hebrew form of the verb of existence is derived from this name of God."³⁰⁵ The revelation in Exodus 3 is, however, a combination of names, the first of which is often overlooked in popular treatments of the Names of God. God first answers Moses by telling him that the Divine Name by

³⁰⁵ Breckinridge; 202.

which He is to be 're-introduced' to the children of Israel, is "I Am that I Am" - the Hebrew, 'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) - only shortening it to the more common 'ehyeh, or YHWH, at the end of the sentence, "Tell them, 'ehyeh has sent me to you." Thus we must first seek the meaning of YHWH from its longer precursor YHWH *asher* YHWH in this passage. Bavinck reasons that as it was to the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel that Moses was being sent, and it was this class of people who would naturally question Moses as to just Who had sent him, the most natural interpretation of the longer form of God's Name is that it "signifies that he who now calls Moses and is about to deliver Israel is the same God who had appeared to the fathers. He is that he is, the same yesterday, today, and forever."³⁰⁶

In this God lays claim to being the only God, the only Self-Existent Being, *ho on* of the ancient Greek philosophers - *the Being One* - in contradistinction from all the idols and vain thoughts of the heathen. Perhaps the Israelites had, in the course of over four hundred years, imbibed a fair dose of Egyptian mythology and idolatry - it would be truly remarkable if they had not! - this Name was perfectly designed to quickly disabuse them of their polytheistic notions. The very question coming from Moses' lips seems to admit of more than one God in the universe. It may be less a question of 'What is Your Name?' as 'Which God are *You*?' To which God answers, the *Only* God, the God Who not only *has* Being, but *is* Being. Dabney makes the point that "this name, with its kindred derivatives, is never applied to any other but the one proper God, because no other being has the attribute which it signifies."³⁰⁷ It was the constant task of the prophets of YHWH to remind the children of Israel of this fact, as Isaiah illustrates,

I am the LORD, and there is none else, beside Me there is no God; I have girded thee, though thou hast not known Me; That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside Me; I am the LORD; and there is none else.

(Isaiah 45:5-6)

³⁰⁶ Bavinck; 105.

³⁰⁷ Dabney; 146.

This passage also illustrates how we have come to render the tetragrammaton in our English Bibles, by convention, as it were, accepted over many generations of translations. The four letters (that is what tetragrammaton means) *Yod - He - Vav - Heh* are transliterated into YHWH (though in the Hebrew, of course, they are HWHY), the pronunciation of which is indeterminate. Matters are not helped by the age-old superstition of the Jewish religion, in which this 'name' cannot and must not be pronounced, but is rather circumlocuted by *ha shem*, 'the Name.' If the vowels of the Hebrew word for Lord, *adonai*, are inserted in the tetragrammaton, we arrive at

Y^aH^oV^{ai}H

which is then rendered in English as *Jehovah*. This may indeed have been the pronunciation of the Memorial Name of God in Moses' day, but it also may not have been. Thus many modern English versions have abandoned the term *Jehovah* and replaced it with a distinct spelling of the word 'Lord' so as to distinguish it from the Hebrew *adonai*. Whenever YHWH is found in the Hebrew text, therefore, it is rendered with a large capital 'L' followed by smaller capital letters 'ORD' thus: **LORD**, with *adonai* consistently rendered **Lord**.

Regardless of how it is written or pronounced, the etymology of the word is clearer than most Names of God, and the context in which it is given in such passages as Exodus 3 and Isaiah 45 gives unmistakable guidance as to its fundamental meaning: it is the Name of the Self-Existent *I AM*. So unmistakable is this fact, that when Jesus used the Name himself, His unbelieving audience did not misunderstand His meaning.

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

(John 8:56-59)

----- Unit 11c -----

The Attributive Names of God:

Among the Names of God given in Scripture there are many which can also be applied to other beings, such as *adonai* which means 'lord' and is often applied to rulers and angelic beings as well as to God. The Greek rendering of *adonai* is consistently *kurios*, as the Greek translation of *El* is uniformly *Theos*. The former indicates dominion, but not necessarily absolute dominion as it is also applied to civil magistrates and to the authority exercised or granted to angels over certain nations. Thus *adonai* is capitalized to *Adonai*, signifying its being an appellation of God, due to the context in which it is found and not so much due to the word itself.

There are other attributive names – Names of God that speak more to His revealed attributes than to His essential Being (though we have already seen that there only a semantic difference between the Divine Being and the Divine Attributes, for He is One and Simple, not many and complex). Another such Name, similar in meaning to that of *Adonai*, is *Sabaoth*, which is generally translated 'Hosts.' It is more accurately rendered *Tzabaoth* (Hebrew, τωβχ), though that is more difficult to pronounce in English. The word signifies a great host in the military sense, a large army beyond counting, though it is evident in the context in which we find it with reference to God, that the armies of the Lord are not human, but angelic. It was perhaps this 'host' that Elisha's servant was permitted to see when he trembled with fear at the oncoming Aramean army.

*Now when the attendant of the man of God had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" So he answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, **the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.***

(II Kings 6:15-17)

And it was assuredly in the context of this Divine Name that Jesus responded to Peter in the garden, with those stirring words,

Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

(Matthew 26:52-53)

And later to Pontius Pilate,

*Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You to me; what have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then **My servants would be fighting** so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm." Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."*

(John 18:35-37)

Servants of Jehovah in the Old Testament found themselves as soldiers in the 'host' of the Lord, though it was never the case, as has so often been said by 'Christian' rulers, that God fought for this side or that side. Joshua discovered this dramatically on the night before his unconventional attack on Jericho,

*Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?" He said, "No; rather **I indeed come now as captain of the host of the LORD.**" And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, "What has my lord to say to his servant?" The **captain of the LORD'S host** said to Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

(Joshua 5:13-15)

Joshua's response, and the admonition of the Captain that Joshua remove the sandals from his feet, "*for the place where you are standing is holy,*" clearly indicates the presence of a divine being, none other than the Pre-Incarnate Christ, a Christophany of the Old Covenant era. There is great comfort to the believer under either covenant, that Jehovah is *Jehovah Tzabaoth*, so that even little children (believers in Christ) have an inner

strength that the world does not and cannot know, “*You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*”³⁰⁸

Space will fail us if we attempt to enumerate the many construct names of God associated with the Memorial Name, *Jehovah* or *Yahweh*. Often in the redemptive narrative we encounter a ‘new’ name attributed to God on the basis of a ‘new’ disclosure of His grace and mercy, or His provision or protection, toward His people. Thus Hagar, though not a member of the covenant people, knew that it was God who saw her in her misery; *El Rohi*, the ‘God Who Sees,’

*Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “(You are a **God who sees**”; for she said, “Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?”*

(Genesis 16:13)

Abraham learned of the provision of the Lord through his obedience in the matter of sacrificing Isaac, a context that should give sober pause to modern Christians who frequently use the associated ‘name’ of God in very flippant and materialistic ways. The Lord provide the ram caught in the thicket, to be sacrificed in Isaac’s stead, and Abraham praised God as *Adonai Jireh*, ‘the Lord will provide.’³⁰⁹

*Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place **The LORD Will Provide**, as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.”*

(Genesis 22:10-14)

These construct names of God were often prophet, showing not only what God was to His people, but what He would be in the eschatological future hope. Thus we

³⁰⁸ | John 4:4

³⁰⁹ Note that Hagar uses the most general name for God, *El*; whereas Abraham uses the more submissive form *Adonai*; neither ‘knew’ God as *Jehovah* as yet, for that revelation in the fullness of its meaning was to come in Moses’ day.

read of the future Davidic Kingdom through the prophet Jeremiah, in which the operative attribute of God is not *power*, as one might expect for the establishing of a kingdom, but rather *righteousness*. Hence the Divine Name, *Jehovah Tzidkenu*.

*'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: **the LORD is our righteousness.**'*

(Jeremiah 33:14-16)

There remains such additional constructs as *Nissi* – My Banner, *Shalom* – Peace, *Makkedesh* – Sanctifier, and *Shammah* – the Lord Who is There, and many others. There is a danger within modern Christianity, as with the attributes of God, of treating the names of God as a talisman, almost in the Roman Catholic practice of having a particular 'saint' to pray to for a particular need. The Names of God are not different modes in which God interacts with His people. Rather they are different facets of His incomprehensible nature; each name signifying the totality of God, but revealing this or that attribute of that pure and simple nature to our finite minds. Ultimately, of course, the Name of God that stands preeminent over all others, because the last and fullest revelation of God, is the Name which is above every name, the Name of Jesus.

Session 12 – The Trinity: Part I

----- Unit 12a -----

The Mystery of the Godhead:

Many systematic theology texts place a discussion of the Trinitarian nature of God at the beginning of the treatment of the Divine Attributes, primarily because the doctrine of the Trinity is such a fundamental plank in the theology of Christianity. But there is a good argument to be made that the Trinitarian formulation of the Divine Being is *not* an attribute at all. And though we have every reason to believe, as we confess, that the One True God has existed eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a dogmatic statement we wish to outline and defend in these next two lessons – this truth is also not essential to the arguments for the existence of God. It is both logically and biblically out of order to delve into the doctrine of the Trinity, without first having established the Unity and Simplicity of God, along with the manifold attributes predicated of the Divine Being in Scripture. We thus follow the progression of first establishing the *Matter* of God – the undeniable principle that God *is*, followed by the *Manifestation* of God – the self-disclosure of the Divine Nature to Creation, and particularly to Man, followed finally by the *Mode* of the Divine Existence – the Triune Godhead as also revealed in Scripture.

This order is important for at least two reasons. First, by establishing the ‘Existence and Attributes’ of God before setting forth the principle and proof of the Trinity, we thereby establish what is true – and to be believed – of *each* Person of the Trinity, thus avoiding the common error of associating this or that attribute with either one Person of the Trinity or another. Second, whereas the statements concerning the existence and those regarding the attributes of God may be considered theological *propositions*, those with respect to the Trinity are more in the nature of *conclusion*. We believe in the existence of God through the positive testimony of our senses and reason; we affirm the attributes of God because of the positive testimony of Scripture; but with regard to the Trinity, we both affirm and believe because we can do no other – the weight of biblical evidence leads inexorably to the conclusion that we would derive under no other rational circumstances whatsoever. The German Protestant theologian



Helmut Thielicke (1908-86)

Helmut Thielicke writes in *The Evangelical Faith*, "Strictly speaking, the doctrine of the Trinity does not solve a problem. It recognizes that all solutions are inadequate because in arrogant autonomy they dissolve the mystery of God."³¹⁰ These words are worth considering, for on no other aspect of Christian theology is there as much controversy as with the doctrine of the Trinity. Without exception, those who have veered from this fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, have

done so on 'rational' grounds. With regard to this doctrine, van Oosterzie writes, "...we approach a rock for our thought, made famous by countless shipwrecks."³¹¹ And W. G. T. Shedd quotes a Dr. Smith as saying, "as he that denies this fundamental article of the Christian religion may lose his soul, so he that much strives to understand it may lose his wits."³¹²

The doctrine of the Trinity is, therefore, not susceptible to rational examination; it is *supra*-rational and founded entirely upon revelation. "The doctrine of the Trinity is one of revelation, not of natural religion, and therefore the first work to be done respecting it, is to deduce it from the language of Scripture."³¹³ The theologian does well to admit, up front, that the doctrine he wishes to establish and defend is not a product of human reason. Indeed, the Trinitarian dogma is so seemingly *irrational*, that this is perhaps the strongest proof that can be found as to its divine revelatory origin – it is truly hard to conceive the Church developing such a repugnant theological proposition, uniquely designed to offend the rational sensibilities of all manner of men. "But who cannot see that the Christian consciousness would never have thought of expressing itself in this way, unless it had been guided and influenced by the *data* of Scripture?"³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Thielicke, Helmut *The Evangelical Faith: Volume 2 – The Doctrine of God and of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1977); 131.

³¹¹ Van Oosterzie *Christian Dogmatics*; 272.

³¹² Shedd *Dogmatic Theology*; 250.

³¹³ *Ibid.*; 258.

³¹⁴ Van Oosterzie; 287.

Therefore, if anything, the Christian theologian desires more to defend the fact that the Trinitarian dogma *transcends* reason, than to attempt to rationally define it. "The most sober-minded divines admit that there is incomprehensible mystery in the doctrine of the Trinity. All attempts to explain it have failed."³¹⁵ Up to this point in our studies, that which we have learned concerning the existence and attributes of God can rightly be called majestic, but not really mysterious. The fullness of each aspect of the study of God is indeed beyond the comprehension of man, but the concepts thus far set forth are not, in themselves, incomprehensible. An infinite and eternal God is conceivable to the mind of man, in whose heart God himself has set eternity; we have not yet really touched upon the mysterious in God. The doctrine of the Trinity takes us fully there. "To this extent the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact a statement of limitation, a gesture of rebuke which is also a reference to the ineffable. It does not belong to the sphere of definitions, which presuppose the possession of concepts."³¹⁶

Thus we begin our 'study' of the Trinity by stating that the doctrine is not so much a proposition as it is a conclusion. It is where all Christian thinking is forced to go and to arrive at, through the inexorable progression of the testimony of Scripture concerning the mode of existence of God. And the process is inexorable; the Christian cannot avoid it, for it lies at the very heart of both his being and his redemption. He is presented by passage after passage in Scripture with the three Persons of but One God, and though he cannot rationalize his way to anything but error, he accepts the reality of the Trinity as much as he accepts the reality of his own being. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological nicety, nor yet a controversial dogma to be avoided in polite conversation, but "it is the subsequent product of a discussion which our consciousness must conduct with itself when it finds itself confronted with this divine self-disclosure."³¹⁷ This mystery that is the Trinity is also the crowning jewel of Christian devotion, which any and all attempts at rational explanation can only defile. A. W. Tozer writes,

³¹⁵ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*; 248.

³¹⁶ Thielicke; 131.

³¹⁷ Thielicke; 132.

To meditate on the three Persons of the Godhead is to walk in thought through the garden eastward in Eden and to tread on holy ground. Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity must remain forever futile, and only by deepest reverence can it be saved from actual presumption.³¹⁸

The assertion that the doctrine of the Trinity is such that the Church would never have developed apart from the strongest biblical guidance, is confirmed by the historical fact that the Church *did not* develop the doctrine until forced to by the infiltration of erroneous and heretical 'explanations' regarding what was universally accepted by faith: the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. From Pentecost, "faith recognises [*sic*] one God; but confesses as such, with the Father, also the Son and the Holy Ghost."³¹⁹ Critical analysis of this confession – found in the Baptismal Formula as well as the Apostolic benedictions – was not done in the days of the apostles themselves, nor even in those of the Apostolic Fathers after them. The writings of the late first and the second centuries presuppose the worship of Jesus Christ as God, alongside as thorough-going a monotheism as had ever existed within Judaism.

A truth often lies in the mind of the Church as an object of faith, long before it is wrought out in its doctrinal form; that is, before it is analyzed, its contents clearly ascertained, and its elements stated in due relation to each other...The conviction was deeply settled in the minds of all Christians that Christ is a divine person. The glory which He displayed, the authority which He assumed, the power which He exhibited, the benefits which He conferred, necessitated the recognition of Him as the true God. No less strong, however, was the conviction that there is only one God.³²⁰

----- Unit 12b -----

The Fires of Controversy:

No attempt was made to 'explain' this belief until the Alexandrian theologian Origen (c. 185 – 254), whose work on the subject was less a doctrinal development as it

³¹⁸ Tozer *The Knowledge of the Holy*; 25.

³¹⁹ Van Oosterzie; 285.

³²⁰ Hodge; 449.

was a philosophical speculation. It was only when other men, following in Origen's footsteps, began to say and to write things that impinged upon the Church's innate faith in the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, that a doctrine of a plurality of persons in the Godhead – culminating in the doctrine of the Trinity – began to grow.

The early church's doctrine of the Trinity took on form during its resistance against dangerous heresies, in which the unity of Christ with God was called in question, either on God's behalf or on Christ's. It was only in these controversies that Trinitarian dogma grew up; and with the dogma grew its formulation, as philosophical terminology was given a new theological mould.³²¹

Origen, a scholar in the famous theological school of Alexandria, was powerfully influenced by the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato, and by the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, whose works are a compendium of synthesis between Moses and Plato. Thus from the neo-Platonic philosophy of the era, as well as from the writings of the Apostle John, Origen fixated on the 'Logos' as an emanation from the Deity. He quite correctly associated the Logos with Christ, as the apostle does in his gospel. But then Origen incorporated the Logos philosophy of the Greeks and of Philo, and while he stayed within orthodoxy in most of his statements, ventured perilously close to speculative error. Essentially, Origen taught that the Logos/Son was eternally emanated from the Deity/Father, the concept of emanation determining the structure of his nascent 'trinitarian' thought.³²² His was a valuable insight, though couched in questionable terminology, that would eventually lead to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in the Athanasian/Nicæan formulations.

The suggestion of an *eternal generation* was a needed contribution. It was unconsciously a step in the direction of the *co-eternity* and *co-equality* of the Son with the Father, as expressed in the Church's doctrine of the Trinity.³²³

³²¹ Moltmann, Jürgen *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper & Row; 1981); 129.

³²² Thielicke; 139. The word 'trinitarian' is in quotations simply because Origen's writing contain no development of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

³²³ Neve, J. L. *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; 1946); 108.

Origen's speculation concerning the nature of the relationship between Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and God His Father, contained language that could easily be interpreted as placing Christ on the level of a *creature*, albeit an eternal one. He made a subtle distinction between God the Father and God the Son, one that his followers would expand upon into outright heresy. "The Father, alone, according to his was $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ (ho theos - 'God'), the Son was simply $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ('God'). The Son was $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ (God of/from God) and not $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ ('Himself God')."³²⁴ This teaching was the beginning of an ontological subordinationism that crept into later speculation with regard to the nature of the Son's relationship to the Father, and would culminate in the heresy of another Alexandrian, Arius the presbyter.

Ontological subordinationism encompasses any teaching that, while attempting to assert the deity of Jesus Christ, subordinates that deity - the fullness, eternality, or power thereof - to the deity of the Father. It is essentially saying that while Jesus is God, He is *less God* than the Father. This form of thinking with regard to the Godhead must lead to polytheism, which is a visceral attack upon the inherent faith of the Church. To avoid such a conclusion, Arius (c. 250-336) simply broke the tension by making Christ an out-and-out creation of God. It was Arius, and the Arian movement that grew from his teachings, that claimed "there was a time when Christ was not," making Him the greatest of God's creations, but a creature all the same. "In his endeavor to explain Christ, Arius introduced a mythological figure - a *tertium quid* ('a third thing'), half-God and half-man - something like the *demiurge* of the Gnostics. This Christ was not a mere man. He was a demi-god; divine indeed, but not co-equal with the Father."³²⁵ Dabney summarizes Arius' doctrine of Christ in a manner that vividly shows its deviation from the foundational faith of the Church,

[Arius] represents the Son, prior to His incarnation, as an infinitely exalted creature, produced (or generated) by God out of nothing, endued with the nearest possible

³²⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*; 452.

³²⁵ Neve; 115.

approximation to his own perfections, adopted into sonship, clothed with a sort of deputized divinity, and employed by God as His glorious agent in all his works of creation and redemption.³²⁶

The teaching of Arius represents a category of non-trinitarian thought within Church history known as ‘subordinationism,’ in which, by whatever philosophical terminology employed, the divinity of Christ is subordinated to that of the Father. The distinct identity of Christ is maintained, but at the expense of His true divinity. The other characteristic error of all attempted rationalizations of the Godhead, is called Patripassianism, or Modalism. In this second brand of error, the distinction of persons is eradicated, and the ‘persons’ of the Godhead become simply modes of the Divine Being as manifested to the human mind. The earliest and most famous of the Modalists was Sabellius (*fl.* ca 215 possibly in Rome), so much so that the basic outlines of modalistic teaching are called Sabellianism. Sabellius emphasized both the Unity and the Simplicity of God in determining that such apparent distinctions of Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – cannot be *real*, but must be simply modes of operation of the one God with respect to His Creation, particularly with respect to man.

His system may be outlined as follows: God is a Unity. There are no distinctions in the divine Being, but God the divine Unity reveals Himself successfully [*sic*] in three different modes or forms. In the Father God reveals Himself as creator; in the Son, as redeemer; and in the Spirit, as sanctifier. But these are not three hypostases [*i.e., persons*]; they are rather three roles or parts played by the one person.³²⁷

Thielicke adds, “Strictly speaking, then, the three figures of the Trinity are not ‘figures’ but simply different modes in which the one identical figure of God comes to expression.”³²⁸ While Sabellius does thus preserve the true divinity of Christ, he does so at the expense of the distinct identity of Christ, an error of equal magnitude with that of Arius. J. L. Dagg, with tongue apparently planted firmly in cheek, re-writes the Lord’s words in John14:16 along Sabellian lines,

³²⁶ Dabney; 176.

³²⁷ Neve; 111.

³²⁸ Thielicke; 146.

I, who am the same person with the Father, will pray the Father, who is no other than myself, in a different office, or mode of manifestation, and he shall give you another comforter, who is not another, but the same person as my Father and myself.³²⁹

The errors of Sabellius and Arius were each refuted in turn by the orthodox writers of the early Church, and the persistence of their errors lead to the development of the Trinitarian Doctrine by Athanasius at the Council of Nicæa in AD 325. A fuller treatment of the two families of error belongs to the study of the History of Christian Doctrine, but their summary here serves both to provide the historical backdrop to the development of the orthodox dogma of trinitarianism, as well as to highlight the two basic lines upon which error has traveled, and will always travel, with regard to the plurality of Persons within the Unity of God.

While it is widely – and erroneously – believed that the doctrine of the Trinity is a ‘New Testament’ teaching, it is nevertheless true that the Old Testament allusions to the doctrine are shadowy, and are far more clearly seen by the light of the later revelation. Yet one thing is very clear in the Old Testament, and that is the plurality of persons who are manifested in the pages of the Old Testament as being Jehovah.

The doctrine of the Trinity is revealed in the Old Testament, in the same degree that the other truths of Christianity are; not with the clearness and fullness of the New Testament, yet really and plainly.³³⁰

³²⁹ Dagg; 248.

³³⁰ Shedd; 262.

----- Unit 12c -----

Plurality & Distinction in the Self-Disclosure of God:

Having firmly established the biblical teaching regarding the unity of God, it would seem to be an impossibility and a contradiction to set forth the Godhead in terms of a plurality. But it is the very same testimony of Scripture that does so, and in so compelling a manner that *plurality within unity* has always been the faith “*once for all handed down to the saints.*”

The Unity of the Divine Being; the true and equal divinity of the Father, Son, and Spirit; their distinct personality; the relation in which they stand one to the other, and to the Church and the world, are not presented in a doctrinal formula in the Word of God, but the several constituent elements of the doctrine are asserted, or assumed, over and over, from the beginning to the end of the Bible.³³¹

It is, therefore, the first step in developing a biblical trinitarianism, to establish both the Old Testament and the New Testament teaching with respect to the distinct personalities presented vis-à-vis the Godhead. Many scholars begin with Genesis 1:1 – one can hardly begin any earlier in the biblical record than that – with the plural form of the name for God: *Elohim*. Objections are indeed raised by liberal and conservative theologians, commentators, and lexical scholars – that the plural form of the noun *Eloah* does not necessarily signify a plurality within God; that *Elohim* might be just the ‘plural of majesty’ – though even the later kings of Israel did not use such language; that the plural form is a hold-over from an earlier polytheistic religion, and so forth. We will not enter the debate for two reasons: first, while the plural form of the noun might signify a plurality, it is too indefinite to specify a Trinity; and second, there is far too many passages – starting in Genesis 1 – that cannot be evaded with regard to a plurality in God. Still, a word in defense of plurality in *Elohim* should be stated: It was the concerted purpose of Moses to lead the children of Israel away from the pagan polytheism of Egypt and toward the strict monotheism of Jehovah’s people. It would be passing strange for him, or any

³³¹ Hodge; 446.

later writer, editor, or redactor, to allow plural forms of the name of God to creep into the text of the nation's holy book. Dagg writes in this context,

The Hebrew scriptures guard the doctrine of God's unity with great care; and if all plurality were inconsistent with it, this important purpose of the revelation made to the Hebrews, would have been better subserved if none but singular nouns for the deity had been admitted, yet plural names are very commonly employed.³³²

But we move on from the plural form of God's Name in verse 1, to the introduction of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2, "...and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters." Thus what appears to be another personal agent – the רוח אֱלֹהִים – *ruach Elohim*, appears in the context of Creation, and just prior to the first creative word being spoken. It is, of course, argued that the Hebrew word *ruach* also means 'wind,' and could simply stand for the creative power of God about to be exercised in dividing and forming the constituent parts of the Cosmos. But the next verse is a command, "Let there be light," and its position immediately following verse 2 seems strongly to link the personage of the Spirit with the Word of God, resulting in the creative effect: "and there was light." Frankly, if the *ruach Elohim* of verse 2 is an impersonal divine force, then it is quite odd that it would be said to be 'hovering,' and its placement between the declaration of Creation (verse 1) and the execution of Creation (verse 3) is nonsensical.

Elsewhere the same person is mentioned just prior to the partial reversal of Creation: the destruction of almost all life by the Deluge. In Genesis 6:1-3 the Lord (this time designated as *Jehovah*) determines that His Spirit will not strive with man forever,

Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.

(Genesis 6:1-3)

³³² Dagg; 246.

The biblical doctrine of the Spirit, arising from Genesis and developing all the way to Revelation, is that of the *presence* of God immanent in His Creation. He is often called the sevenfold Spirit, and prophetically figured as seven eyes, as in Zechariah 4:10, within the context of which we also read, “*Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.*” The Spirit of God hovers, strives, creates, and sees – all personal predicates indicating a unique and distinct person set in relief against the person of the Father.

But of course the very name ‘Father’ necessitates that of the ‘Son,’ whom we also meet in the Old Testament. To be sure, the identity of the second Person of the Trinity is nowhere as clear in the Old Testament as it is in the New, but He is there nonetheless. Even in Genesis 1, in the same opening verses in which we meet both *Elohim* and *ruach Elohim*, we meet the Word of God. “*And God said,*” is repeated throughout the Creation narrative, establishing the doctrine of creation *by fiat* – by the power of the Word of God. In the opening verses of the Bible, however, the personality of the Word is not manifest; that will come later. But not so late as many would think, not merely with the advent of the New Testament, for in Proverbs 8 we read of God’s Mediator in Creation, personified as Wisdom,

*The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way,
Before His works of old. From everlasting I was established,
From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled,
Before the hills I was brought forth; While He had not yet made the earth and the fields,
Nor the first dust of the world.
When He established the heavens, I was there,
When He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, When He made firm the skies above,
When the springs of the deep became fixed,
When He set for the sea its boundary
So that the water would not transgress His command,
When He marked out the foundations of the earth;
Then I was beside Him, as a master workman;
And I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him,
Rejoicing in the world, His earth,
And having my delight in the sons of men.* (Proverbs 8:22-31)

The identity of the Christ as the Word of God in Creation appears early in the New Testament, and in several of the apostle's writings. John, of course, extols Christ in the beautiful prologue of his gospel, where we find the *Logos*, the 'Word,' "*in the beginning with God,*" just as the wisdom writer stated. Furthermore, "*All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.*" To which thought the Apostle Paul agrees, writing to the church in Colossæ,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

(Colossians 1:15-17)

Still, the presence of the second Person in the Old Testament is somewhat opaque, awaiting the clarity of revelation that would come through the Incarnation. We must read back into Genesis 1, first from Proverbs 8 and then later from the first chapters of the gospel of John and the Epistle to the Colossians. Nonetheless, "*a threefold cause of the origin and preservation of all things is already evident in the O. T. doctrine of creation.*"³³³

The more notable personage in the Old Testament, who appears as distinct *from* God yet possessing the dignity, authority, and power *of* God, is the Angel of Jehovah, the *Ma'lik Yahweh* (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה). There can be no doubt, upon an honest reading of the text, that this person is both distinct from God and yet worshiped as God. Identity of the Angel of Yahweh with the God Himself is made clear in this passage from Judges,

*Now the **angel of the LORD** came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done?"*

(Judges 2:1-2)

³³³ Bavinck; 256.

But a distinction is made between the Angel of the LORD, and the LORD in heaven in the narrative of Abraham's offering of Isaac, Genesis 22.

*Then the **angel of the LORD** called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the **LORD**, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."*

(Genesis 22:15-18)

The physical manifestations of Jehovah in the Old Testament – called *theophanies* – are often interpreted as appearances of the pre-incarnate Christ, or *Christophanies*. To be sure, this interpretation benefits greatly from the greater light shed upon the distinction and deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, but a careful reading of the Old Testament does reveal the other two Persons of the Trinity in adumbrated form. With Trinitarian eyes we can see the plurality of the Godhead also in both the Aaronic benediction and the Isaianic doxology,

The LORD bless you, and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine on you,

And be gracious to you;

The LORD lift up His countenance on you,

And give you peace.

(Numbers 6:24-26)

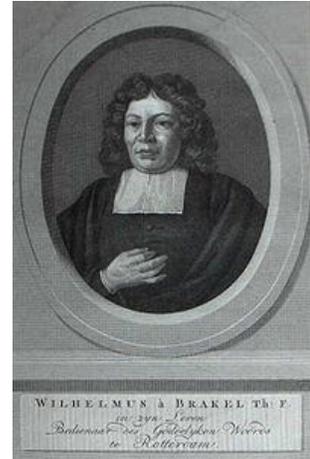
Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,

The whole earth is full of His glory.

(Isaiah 6:3)

We readily grant that there are other possible explanations for each of these passages, but with the evidence of the Spirit of God and the Angel of Jehovah, in addition to God Himself, already present in the testimony of the Old Testament, and with the weight of evidence to be added from the New Testament, it is not a leap of faith to agree with Wilhemus à Brakel, who writes, "...to further facilitate your inner conviction, consider with a believing heart those texts which expressly state that God is Trinitarian, not in His essence but in Persons. In the blessing which the Lord enjoins to

be pronounced upon His people the name *Jehovah* is repeated three times...In each repetition the name *Jehovah* is conjoined to an activity which in the administration of the covenant of grace is specifically ascribed to either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost. Safekeeping is ascribed to the Father, the manifestation of grace to the Son, and the bestowal of peace to the Holy Spirit."³³⁴



Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711)

But it is, of course, in the New Testament that we find the doctrine of the plurality of the One God more fully display-

ed, as it is the testament of Christ's Incarnation and of the Ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Very early in the gospel narrative we encounter the same phenomenon we have just discussed from the Old Testament: the involvement of three distinct persons in an event in which each of the three are exalted with power and authority belonging only to God. The baptism of Jesus by John became the public forum of the Father's anointing, commissioning, and exalting of His Son, through the blessing and power of His Spirit.

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

(Matthew 3:16-17)

The early Church Fathers recognized the triune formulation from the Baptismal Formula handed down by the Lord Jesus, and from this vantage point were able to see clearly the shadows of the Trinity in the Old Testament writings. In Matthew 28, a passage known widely as the "Great Commission," Jesus instructed His disciples to perform the ordinance of baptism on the disciples they would make throughout the world and throughout the ages. The formula given is both unique and remarkable,

³³⁴ à Brakel, Wilhelmus *The Christian's Reasonable Service: Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books; 1999); 143.

*And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

(Matthew 28:18-20)

This one passage ties together much of what we have been studying these past few lessons, for it summarizes the significance of the 'name' of God at the beginning, immediately expanding on that name as identifying the three Persons comprising the One, unified God. The use of the word 'name' by Matthew (and by Jesus, recorded by Matthew) would probably have had a powerful effect on the original Jewish audience. This is because, by superstition evolved from devotion, the Jewish religious leaders had come to forbid the saying of the 'name' of God, the tetragrammaton. Instead, wherever YHWH was found in Scripture, the reader would either say '*Adonai*,' or '*ha shem*' – literally, 'the Name.' Thus Jesus' instructions to baptize disciples in 'the Name' was tantamount to telling them to baptize disciples in the Name of Jehovah, the memorial and covenant Name of the God of Israel. There was no 'change' of Gods from the Old Covenant to the New; the same Jehovah was God of the Church as He was God of Israel.

And the noun is in the singular, also to be expected by the Jewish audience, for there was also no development of 'other' Gods besides Jehovah. There was but one 'Name' simply because there was but one God. But this singular name is then identified by three distinct Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. "We are baptized into one name, because God is one; but that is the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, because it belongs to each of these divine persons."³³⁵ This is a non-dogmatic statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, becoming the universal belief of orthodox Christianity long before a doctrine was forged out of the fires of controversy. The *practical* dogma of one Trinitarian God was born out of the most monotheistic religion known to the world up to that time, a phenomenon that cannot be explained, in any

³³⁵ Dagg; 247.

honest fashion, other than by revelation that comported well with the Old Testament Scriptures already familiar to the early Church.

One might argue that such laxity in doctrinal orthodoxy was to be expected from such 'unlettered' men as John or Peter. But such could hardly be said concerning the Apostle Paul, who 'sat at the feet of Gamaliel,' and was by his own admission an overachiever in the school of Mosaic Judaism. All of Paul's letters clearly indicate that the apostle to the Gentiles was no less Trinitarian in his thought than was Peter. For instance, in II Corinthians 13:14 we read,

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
And the love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.*

"In the apostolic benediction a prayer is addressed to Christ for his grace, to the Father for his love, and to the Spirit for his fellowship. The personality and divinity of each are therefore solemnly recognized every time that this benediction is pronounced and received."³³⁶ This is also seen in the Pauline doxology of Ephesians 4, "*There is one body and **one Spirit**, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; **one Lord**, one faith, one baptism, **one God and Father** of all who is over all and through all and in all.*"³³⁷

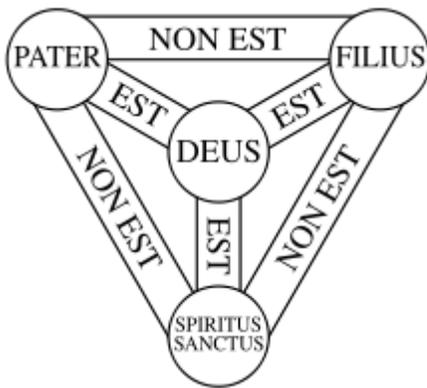
Thus we see established in the consciousness of Scripture, the plurality of persons within the one God. That this plurality comprises three persons is adumbrated in the Old Testament, and clearly stated in the New. That the early Church, steeped in Judaistic monotheism as it was, did not struggle with the concept of 'threeness' within the one true God, is perhaps remarkable. Nonetheless it is undeniable from both the biblical record and the post-apostolic history. The answer to this conundrum is that the Church did not, and has never, affirmed that God is three *in the same manner* as He is one, but rather has fully accepted the divine self-disclosure of both the oneness of essence along with the trinity of persons. "In God there is also but one divine being, because there is but one

³³⁶ Hodge; 448.

³³⁷ Ephesians 4:4-6

divine essence and nature. There is but one that can have actuality of existence...The threeness of the persons, therefore, does not destroy the unity of the nature or essence, and consequently, not that of the being of God.”³³⁸ The distinction of the persons of the Trinity, as revealed in the pages of both Old and New Testament, fully contradict the philosophical ‘explanation’ of Modalism. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not mere names of the same God, simply modes of the divine existence and manifestation. They are, in truth, divine *persons*, from whom come grace, love, and fellowship. It is a mystery indeed, but one with the firmest of Scriptural support.

It remains for the next lesson to develop the biblical defense of the Trinity along the lines of those passages in which *divinity* is predicated of each of the three persons of the Godhead already introduced. This will fully establish that subordinationism is also



an erroneous and dangerously heretical ‘explanation’ of the biblical text. These two refutations of early errors will lead, also in the next lesson, to the systematic and dogmatic formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, such as found within the ancient Athanasian Creed, “**And the catholic faith is this:** That we worship one God in Trinity,

and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. “

³³⁸ Boyce, *Abstract of Theology*; 136.

Session 13 – The Trinity: Part II

*“The absolute consideration of God (as to His nature and attributes)
begets the relative (as to the persons).
Here we are occupied with the adorable mystery of the Trinity,
which neither reason can comprehend nor example prove,
but the authority of divine revelation alone purposes to be received
by faith and adored.”
(Francis Turretin)*

----- Unit 13a -----

The Terminology of Trinity:

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity is a logical, stepwise procedure, with each step illuminated by Scripture, the *“light unto our path and lamp unto our feet.”* All doctrine must be thus enlightened if theology is to avoid the ‘vain philosophy’ of human reason, but this prerequisite is of the utmost importance with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, transcending as it does all human reason. Thus we begin, as we did in our last lesson, by establishing the distinct and particular ‘entities’ revealed in Scripture as standing in or near the role of God: in doctrinal and liturgical terminology, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These are, to be sure, known under various names in the Bible – the *Spirit of God, or of the Lord; the Angel of the Lord* and the *Servant of Jehovah*, along with the various Names of God that we have already encountered. But three distinct ‘persons’ do emerge from a dispassionate reading of Scripture, and it is to those ‘persons’ that we turn in this lesson, to continue to develop the biblical thought and logic that culminates inexorably in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The word ‘persons’ has been placed – in this introductory section only – in quotation marks due to the theological and dogmatic significance of the term. In the controversy of the late-second and third centuries, leading to the Athanasian formulation at the Council of Nicæa, Christian orthodoxy settled upon a very important distinction between two words: *essence* and *person*. Now other words were used as synonyms for each, an enumeration and discussion of which would become both tedious and confusing in this setting. Yet the doctrinal issues with regard to the three beings manifested in

Scripture as standing in or near the place of God, coupled with the unmistakable monotheism of Scripture, boiled down to the distinction men like Tertullian and Athanasius made between the *essence* of the Deity, and the *persons* of the Godhead. The first term, *essence*, signifies absolute being – that without which the Being would cease to exist. One may say that the essence of a particular man is *humanity*; if this or that being does not possess humanity, he or she is not ‘man.’ Thus the essence of God is what God is, absolutely, and is related in entirety to the discussions earlier with regard to the existence, the attributes, and the names of God.

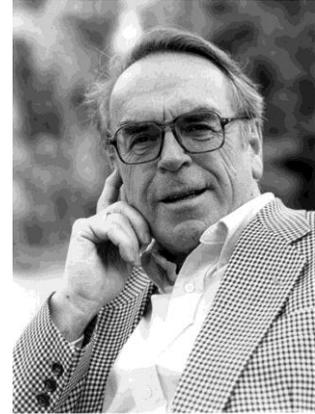
It is the second term, ‘person,’ that has aroused both controversy and rejection with respect to the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity. That doctrine, properly expressed, does not constitute a logical contradiction at all, for the Church has never maintained that God is *one* in the same sense as He is *three*. With reference to the Divine Essence, it is One – a Unity, indivisible and simple – as has been established both from Scripture and from reason. This is God as the self-existent One; it is the *what* of the divine existence. The ‘persons’ are the *how*. The One God thus exists eternally in three distinct ‘persons’ – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – each of Whom are fully God in the indivisible essence of the Godhead. “There is a distinction rather than an essential difference between the divine persons. Each Person is coequal and the divine Being in the full sense of the word, existing in such a manner.”³³⁹

‘Essence’ is fairly self-explanatory, especially as one becomes more familiar with the terminology related to the discussion of ‘being.’ It remained, however, for the Church to define ‘person,’ which was made significantly more difficult in the early centuries by the ‘poverty of language’ – the lack of words suitable for the immensity of the thought conveyed – and due to the differences between the Greek and the Latin employed. For instance, the biblical word that is frequently used in regard to the distinct persons of the Godhead, is *prosopon*. This word literally means ‘a mask,’ and would inevitably lead to Sabellian modalism if utilized in doctrinal formulations of the Trinity. Thus the Greek

³³⁹ à Brakel; 144-145.

scholars emphasized another word, also used in Scripture in synonymous passages relating to the three persons (particularly the Person of the Son): *hypostases*, which cannot mean merely a 'mask,' but represents the identity of a being.

Jürgen Moltmann writes, "Hypostasis does not mean the mask or mode of appearance; it means the individual existence of a particular nature."³⁴⁰ Thus the Greek apologists for the doctrine of the Trinity used the word 'hypostasis' with regard to the three distinct entities within the Godhead. But Latin does not have a word equivalent to the Greek *hypostasis*, and so the Latins used their best equivalent for the word *prosopon*, which was *substantia*. Unfortunately, the corresponding word



Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926)

for *substantia* back into the Greek (who would not use *prosopon* to translate it) connotes the *essential being* of something – its *substance*. Thus the Greeks and the Latins were constantly arguing over the words they were using to say the same thing with regard to doctrine. Great is the mystery of the Trinity...made even more great by the confusion of language.

This historical baggage notwithstanding, modern theologians working in English have settled on 'person' as the term to use when designating the individual, incommunicable modes of the divine existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The term 'person' as applied to the Godhead, by consistent usage over seventeen centuries, has come to mean "a complete, intelligent, and individual subsistence in the one undivided essence of God, which is neither a part of any other subsistence, nor sustained by any other subsistence, and is distinguished from other subsistences by an incommunicable property."³⁴¹ This means that the *essence* of God – His absolute Divinity with all of the associated attributes – is *communicable* to each of the Persons of the Godhead, though the individual 'characteristics' or properties of the Persons is *not communicable* to the others.

³⁴⁰ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*; 171.

³⁴¹ Shedd; 277.

In other words, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are God, each possessing the fullness of the Deity indivisibly; but the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit, nor are the Father and Spirit interchangeable. Thus “a trinitarian person includes all that is the unity, but not all that is in the trinity of God; all that is in the essence, but not all that is in the three modes of the essence.”³⁴²

There is, however, one more difficult word to throw into the mix in order to guard against another form of error that leads to tritheism – the existence of three gods. This term is *emperichoresis*, which is often translated ‘coexistence,’ though that English word is truly insufficient to capture the meaning of the Greek term. The thought conveyed is the interconnectedness of life that exists eternally within the Godhead, so that “the Father exists in the Son, the Son in the Father, and the Holy Spirit exists in the Father and in the Son.”³⁴³ This concept is presented in such biblical passages as John 17:20-21, where the Lord Jesus founds the unity of the Church upon the *emperichoresis* of the Godhead,

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.
(John 17:20-21)

And Jesus was not confusing the distinction of the Persons of the Godhead when he proclaimed to the Jewish religious establishment, “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:30), or when He told Philip, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father...Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.*” (John 14:9, 11). These are statements not of modalism – that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son – but of the mutual indwelling of essential life and love that exists eternally within the Godhead. Thus the three Persons of the Godhead are One in the communicable and essential Deity, and Three in the distinct properties of their personages, in a manner that does not contradict, though it transcends, logic. Bavinck quotes with approbation the famous dictum of Augustine, “We speak of three persons, not in order thereby completely to express it, but in order

³⁴² *Ibid.*; 280.

³⁴³ à Brakel; 145.

that it may not be left wholly unexpressed.”³⁴⁴ Thus we turn to those ‘properties’ that characterize each Person and distinguish between the three: *paternity*, *filiation*, and *procession* or *spiration*.

----- Unit 13b -----

The Father and the Son:

There has been little or no argument over the centuries as to the Deity of the Father; that has been the one point of agreement on all sides. Indeed, the Father’s Deity has represented the essential monotheism of Christianity. “The *Deity of God the Father* is undisputed, and hence there is less need of presenting the proof of it.”³⁴⁵ But unless one views the term ‘Father’ as purely metaphorical, with no connection to the reality of the existence of God in himself, then one is forced to ask the question, ‘In what sense is God *the Father*? And of Whom is He the Father?’ Thus the *paternity* of God becomes a theological question and concern, which then led to the discussion and controversy surrounding the divinity of the Son. Hence we treat the first two Persons of the Godhead together: the *Father* and the *Son*.

In what sense is God ‘Father’? In one sense God is Father by virtue of Creation, and in this sense many liberal theologies have developed toward universalism: the ‘Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.’ God is also biblically referred to as the ‘Father’ of Israel, as in Malachi chapter 1.

‘A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?’ says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, ‘How have we despised Your name?’ (Malachi 1:6)

And God is called the “*Father of spirits*” in Hebrews 12:9. Each of these are examples of one sense in which God is the ‘Father’ of certain aspects of the created universe, but therein lies the problem with regard to comprehending the name ‘Father’ from such

³⁴⁴ Bavinck; 300.

³⁴⁵ Shedd; 306.

examples: each one links the Fatherhood of God with an act of the divine will *in time*: the creation of the universe, the creation of spirits, the 'creation' of the nation Israel. Each is predicated on a temporal manifestation of the divine will and act, and therefore cannot represent the eternal and essential meaning of the term 'Father' as it pertains to God. If the orthodox Christian view of the indivisibility of the divine essence within the distinctive personalities of the divine Godhead is true, then the Fatherhood of God cannot be less eternal than God. "Consequently, in the Christian understanding of God the Father, what is meant is not 'the father of the universe,' but simply and exclusively 'the Father of the Son' Jesus Christ."³⁴⁶ Shedd adds, "God, in himself, and irrespective of any reference to the created universe, is a father; the Father of the Son."³⁴⁷

The revelation of the Son is not limited to the New Testament, and thus the nature of the Father as related to the Son is something that begins to be seen even before the Incarnation of that Son. For instance, in Psalm 2 there is the enigmatic phrase, "*Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way.*"³⁴⁸ Some commentators limit this to the son of the Davidic king – perhaps to Solomon – in a royal admonition to show loyalty to the dynastic succession. But the psalm itself ranges far beyond just the earthly and temporal reign of a Judahite king in Israel, and contains the prophetic words much later heard at the baptism of Jesus, "*You are My Son, today I have begotten Thee.*"³⁴⁹ The wisdom of Agur also speaks of a divine Son, in Proverbs 30.

Who has ascended into heaven and descended?

Who has gathered the wind in His fists?

Who has wrapped the waters in His garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is His name or His son's name?

Surely you know!

(Proverbs 30:4)

³⁴⁶ Moltmann; 163.

³⁴⁷ Shedd; 306.

³⁴⁸ Psalm 2:12

³⁴⁹ Psalm 2:7

Therefore, when we encounter the 'Father' we arrive at the fount of the Trinitarian God, the One who is the Father of the Son and therefore the source, as it were, of the Son. But here we must tread carefully, for it is one thing to call the Father the fount of the Trinity, and quite another to call Him the fount of Divinity. To do the first is to acknowledge the full reality of the terms employed: Father and Son (of the Spirit more later), but to assert the second is to immediately incorporate an essential distinction within the Godhead, and to adopt the Subordinationism of Arius. 'Strictly speaking, however, deity denotes the Divine essence; and the first person is not the Father of the essence.'³⁵⁰

It is crucial to the understanding of the Trinity to begin where the Trinity begins: with the Father of the Son, and to move with the progressive revelation of the Scriptures, to the Son and from there to the Spirit. It is equally crucial to the testimony of the Christian faith to understand that this Fatherhood is related essentially to the Son, Jesus Christ, for it is in this understanding that the believer comes to grasp and appreciate his or her own relationship to the Father, the fount of the Trinity. The biblical self-disclosure of God narrows the focus of his 'Fatherhood' such that it does not apply eminently to the entirety of creation (i.e., the 'Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man') but uniquely and powerfully to the Son of His eternal generation, *and* to those who are 'in Him.'

But anyone who wants to understand the Trinitarian God as Father must forget the ideas behind this patriarchal religion – the super-ego, the father of the family, the father of his country, even 'the fatherly providence.' He must gaze solely at the life and message of his brother Jesus; for in fellowship with the only begotten Son he will recognize that the Father of Jesus Christ is his Father too, and he will understand what the divine fatherhood really means.³⁵¹

There was no doubt or dispute among the early Christians that Jesus Christ was to be worshipped, nor any real concern that such worship in any way violated the strict

³⁵⁰ Shedd; 312.

³⁵¹ Moltmann; 163.

monotheism of their religion. The deity of Christ was as much an article of faith as it was the teaching of the apostles, long before it was a doctrine of the Church. But it was upon this issue, the divinity of Jesus Christ, that the whole controversy centered, for once the deity of Christ is proven, then the plurality of the Godhead is established, and it is but a small step to the Trinity. The situation is indeed stacked heavily in favor of the divinity of Christ, for otherwise the worship of Christ cannot be defended: no matter how exalted a creature He may be, if He remains a creature, then it is idolatry to worship Him. That much was plain to the least educated of believers in the early Church, as it remains plain to 'unlettered' believers throughout the ages. That the worship of Christ Jesus is both right and true, is an article of faith so strong, that no amount of scholarly or philosophical machination can wrest from the Church's heart.

But what is the teaching of Scripture in this regard? Modern liberal theologians and 'higher critics' in search of the 'historical Jesus,' claim that the Lord never attributed deity to himself, that such claims were made much later on his behalf. Again, it is odd that the Church should develop a doctrine concerning the divinity of Christ, while at the same time assiduously maintaining the monotheism of its Jewish heritage. But the question does remain: 'Did Jesus ever claim to be God?' If we accept the testimony of the Gospels (which the searchers for the historical Jesus do not in their entirety), the answer is no and yes. No, Jesus never explicitly stated that He was God, in so many words. But we have already been reminded of His claim to being 'one' with the Father (John 10:30), so much so that to see Jesus was to see the Father (John 14:9). Also, we have the indirect testimony of the Jews, who interpreted Jesus' words as a claim to be equal to God, and consequently took up stones to stone Him.

At that time the Feast of the Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to

Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?" The Jews answered Him, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God."
(John 10:22-33)

It is argued that immediately afterward Jesus 'mitigates' His claim to deity by quoting the Psalms in regard to men being called 'gods,' but the entire thrust of His discourse in John 10 is in the context of the unique relationship that He had with the Father, whom He invariably calls 'My' Father. Also, the Jews were not mollified by Jesus' alleged evasion of a claim to being equal with the Father, for they again sought to seize Him (10:39).

In regard to Jesus' self-awareness of divinity, it is important to note that comment just made: that He invariably referred to the Father as His Father, and never included himself in the mix whenever He spoke of 'Our' Father (Matthew 6:9) or 'Your' Father.

*Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to **My Father** and your Father, and to **My God** and your God.'*
(John 20:17)

Perhaps the closest we come to an explicit admission by Jesus to divinity, recorded in the Gospels, is His use of the memorial name of God in John 8. In one breath, as it were, Jesus not only points to himself as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant – the promised Seed – but He also lays personal claim to the eternal and fundamental Name of God, I AM. Notice again the response of the Jews, who understood Jesus' words far more clearly than many modern scholars.

*Jesus answered, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, 'I do not know Him,' I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. **Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.**" Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, **before Abraham was, I AM.**" Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.
(John 8:54-59)*

In addition to these self-attestations from the Lord, there is also the historical situations in which He received the exaltation and worship of the people. Jesus offered no reprimand or denial when 'doubting' Thomas unashamedly acknowledged the deity of his Lord.

And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"
(John 20:26-28)

There is no lack of biblical witness to the deity of the Son, both from His own mouth and from the worshipful mouths of believers. And though the apostolic testimony is not dogmatic or doctrinal, the fullness of Jesus' divinity undergirds all of their writings as it did their worship. Paul's brief exposition of the Gospel message, in his letter to Titus, is illustrious of the overall tenor of the New Testament writings, though more explicit than other passages.

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of **our great God and Savior Jesus Christ**...*
(Titus 2:11-13)

Peter's greeting in his second epistle is of the same tenor.

*Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of **our God and Savior Jesus Christ**. Grace and peace be multiplied to you in **the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord**, as **His divine power** has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*
(II Peter 1:1-4)

But the clearest apostolic testimony to the divinity of Jesus Christ is, of course, Paul's beautiful hymn of praise to the Lord in Philippians Chapter 2. This passage is

important not only for what it says, but also for what it does not say. It speaks of the supreme exaltation of Jesus, the God-Man, and the attribution of all praise and honor and glory to Him. What is not mentioned is that the one true God is a jealous God, who will not share His glory with another. Again, we must conclude that either Jesus is truly God, so that God is not sharing His glory when that glory is concentrated in and worshipped in Christ, or there has been a quantum shift in the biblical teaching concerning God, who is now all of a sudden willing to share His glory with a lesser being, a mere creature. The former interpretation has been the witness of Christianity for two millennia; the latter is destructive of all true religion.

*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, **being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God**, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and **given Him the name which is above every name**, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

This passage also brings us to the next question with regard to the deity of the Son as the Second Person of the Trinity: 'What is the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son?' Paul speaks of '*the form of God*' and '*equality with God*,' but does not unpack these terms so as to show us what are the relations that subsist between the Father and the Son. In essence one God, yet distinct as divine Persons. What is the property that distinguishes the Son from the Father, that incommunicable element of the Son that He does not share with the Father? Theologians refer to this property as **filiation** – the act of being a son – and since Origen have referred to the Son as *eternally generated* from the Father. Because the Father is eternal Father, the Son is eternal Son, and the 'act' of generation is also eternal. This is why Scripture refers to Christ as the 'only begotten' of the Father, for the Second Person of the Trinity stands in the filial relationship to God the Father, and because God is immutable, this relationship must be eternal. It is not the same as human generation – or any creaturely generation, for that matter – but the

relationship between a human father and son is itself the 'image' of the most perfect Father/Son relationship, the eternal. "Human derivation is the transmission of a separate fraction; eternal generation is the communication of an undivided whole."³⁵²

The language that is used is, of course, fitted to our human understanding. We cannot fully conceive of an eternal Father and an eternal Son, but the relationship of Father and Son does have deep significance to mankind (less so in the modern world than in the ancient, but nevertheless still meaningful). We understand the son to be the image of the father, as it is written concerning Seth, the son of Adam (Genesis 5:3), and then we read that the divine Son is the "*the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.*"³⁵³ Thus we accept that the terminology is, to some degree, metaphorical, but not so much as to be denuded of its deep significance – the relationship between the first two Persons of the Godhead is truly related to us as that of Father and Son. "'Father, 'Son,' and 'generation' are words derived from human circumstances. These words, however, in a manner consistent with the incomprehensible character of God, express most emphatically and with utmost propriety both this relationship and their basis for it in God."³⁵⁴

Two points must be developed in regard to the generation of the Son by the Father. The first is that this relationship did not come into being at the Incarnation, still less at the Baptism, of Jesus Christ. This was indeed the 'adoption' of the God-Man, bringing true and full humanity into intimate fellowship within the Godhead. But this speaks to the union of God and Man, not to the eternal generation of the Son by the Father. The rationale for this assertion is the same as made above: that the nature of God is immutable as it is eternal, and therefore cannot assume a different aspect in time.

Christ's manifestation in the flesh cannot be the basis for His Sonship, for His incarnation renders the second Person neither divine nor the only-begotten, proper, and first-begotten Son of God – He was already Son, the eternal Son of the eternal Father.³⁵⁵

³⁵² Shedd; 296.

³⁵³ Hebrews 1:3

³⁵⁴ à Brakel; 150.

³⁵⁵ *ibid.*; 151.

The second point to be made is that the generation of the Son is not from the Father's *will*, but rather from His *nature*. This is theologically crucial, for it asserts that the being of the Son is not a 'choice' that the Father made – even in eternity – but is rather co-equal in essence and nature to the being of the Father. The Father is *eternally* Father, and from that nature as Father, the Son is *eternally* begotten or generated.³⁵⁶

Having established the biblical witness to the deity of the Son, as well as the manner in which this relationship exists between the Father and the Son, it remains to discuss the undeniable aspects of *subordination* found in Scripture. It is evident that the Son's mission on Earth was "*to do the will of the Father,*" which was the bread that He ate and the water that He drank (John 4:34). Jesus' most common form of reference to the Father is "*the One who sent Me,*" and summarizes the entire purpose of the Incarnation in His High Priestly Prayer, John 17.

I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (John 17:4-5)

But even in this passage the eternal glory of the Son shines through: "*with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*" Therefore we cannot interpret passages of evident subordination as referring to the *essence* of the Son without descending into the subordinationist errors of Arius. Rather we must recognize the distinction – not explicitly made in Scripture, but necessary to the proper understanding of what Scripture does say – between the *ontological unity* and the *economical hierarchy* of the Godhead. Moltmann speaks to this issue under the headings of 'economic Trinity' and 'immanent Trinity,' the latter being the same as the ontological Trinity.

Ever since the repulse of modalism through Tertullian, it has been usual to distinguish between the economic and the immanent Trinity. The economic Trinity designates the triune God in his dispensation of salvation, in which he is revealed. The economic Trinity is therefore also called the revelatory Trinity. The immanent Trinity is the name given to

³⁵⁶ Moltmann; 167.

the triune God as he is in himself. The immanent Trinity is also called the substantial Trinity. This distinction cannot mean that there are two different Trinities. It is rather a matter of the same triune God as he is in his saving revelation and as he is in himself.³⁵⁷

Paul refers to this in the briefest of passing comments, in I Corinthians 11.

*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and **the head of Christ is God.*** (I Corinthians 11:2-3)

This passage is no more saying that there is an essential difference between the Father and the Son, than it is saying that there is an essential difference between man and woman. We know from Genesis 1 that *both* man and woman are comprised in the creation 'Man,' created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Man and Woman are ontologically equal, both sharers in their common humanity and, as such, equally image-bearers of God. But their exists by God's decree, an *economic subordination* between man and woman, especially and particularly within the institutions of marriage and of the Church. The comparison that the apostle makes should leave us in no doubt that he in no way diminishes the dignity of Woman, any more than he diminishes the dignity of Christ in the same passage. In the eternal decrees of God – which we will be studying next – the divine plan to redeem a people for God's own possession was established (using human terminology, of course) as a Trinitarian act of the divine purpose and will. The unfolding and fulfillment of that purpose in time is manifested through each of the Persons of the Godhead, with each having particularly emphasized 'roles,' as it were, just as each has particular properties unique to His person. This is the extent of biblical subordinationism with regard to the Trinity, and cannot without serious detriment to the Christian truth, be taken to mean an essential or ontological distinction between the three Most Holy Persons of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

----- Unit 13c -----

³⁵⁷ Moltmann; 151.

The Holy Spirit:

Jürgen Moltmann means no disrespect to the Godhead when he writes, “Whereas according to biblical testimony clear personal concepts are associated with the names of the Father and the Son, the ‘third Person’ of the Trinity has a certain anonymity.”³⁵⁸ It is true that less is said concerning the nature of the Holy Spirit, especially with regard to His relations to the first and second Persons, than is said concerning the Father and the Son and their interrelation. It is not that the Holy Spirit is by any means ‘anonymous’ in the Bible, but rather that the unveiling of His particular ‘Person’ is more obscure, in large measure because the being of a ‘spirit’ is far more difficult for man to comprehend than that of a ‘son.’ “The personality and deity of the Holy Spirit does not present itself to us with such outward and objective clearness as that of the Father and of the Son. The term ‘Spirit’ does not express this personality as plainly as do the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son.’”³⁵⁹

This practical anonymity continued into the early Church, as was manifested in the controversy that led to the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity.

The Arian controversy was so fiercely agitated concerning the divinity of the 2d. Person that the 3d. Person was almost overlooked in it, by both parties. Arius held the Holy Ghost to be a person – but a creature – the first creature, namely, which the Son brought into existence by the Father’s instruction, after His own creation...On the other hand, few, perhaps, of the orthodox, except Athanasius, saw clearly the necessity of extending to Him likewise the same essence with the Father...³⁶⁰

That the Person of the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, yet equal in dignity with the Father and the Son, is evident in the *locus classicus* of the Spirit’s ministry; John chapters 14 – 16. In the first of these chapters, Jesus promises the coming of another ‘Helper’ – the *paraklete*, who will ‘come alongside’ the disciples and will, indeed, dwell within them. Note that in the giving/coming of the Spirit, both the Father and the Son will remain with the disciples forever.

³⁵⁸ Moltmann; 168.

³⁵⁹ Bavinck; 310.

³⁶⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*; 193-94..

*If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that **He may abide with you forever** – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; **I will come to you.***

(John 14:15-18)

In Chapter 15 this same Helper, the Spirit of Truth, will be the constant Guide to the disciples as they go forth into the world to bear witness of Jesus Christ, for it will be the Spirit himself who will bear witness. This passage also illustrates a continuation of the economic hierarchy in the unfolding of the divine plan of redemption, as the Spirit does not testify on His own, but rather bears witness of Jesus Christ.

But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

(John 15:26-27)

Finally, in Chapter 16 we have the fullest exposition of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit anywhere in the Bible, as Jesus expounds in greater detail the utter dependency the Church will have upon the Spirit in order to fulfill both its life and its mission in the world. It is remarkable that the Lord Jesus speaks of the coming Spirit as being better for the disciples than if He himself were to stay with them physically.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.

(John 16:7-15)

It is from the passage in John 15 that we derive the specific ‘property’ that differentiates the third Person of the Trinity from the other two: *procession*. It is thus said that as the Son is *eternally generated* by the Father, the Holy Spirit *eternally proceeds* from

the Father. The Father, again, being the Fount of the Trinity (though, again, not of the Deity). Such terms are meant only to explain, inasmuch as possible, the relations that subsist within the triune Godhead, and are not to be taken as implication of a diminished divinity in either the second or the third Person of the Trinity. Wilhelmus à Brakel writes, "...the words 'generate' and 'proceed' neither suggest superiority or inferiority nor the transformation from nothing to something, for all this is an eternal reality."³⁶¹

This distinction is technical only, for no one has ever been able to truly differentiate between the two terms, 'generation' and 'procession.' This fact has been admitted throughout the doctrinal controversies across the ages, as William Shedd proves in his treatise, the 19th Century theologian quoting John of Damascus, a theologian from the 7th Century.

How procession differs from generation, it is impossible to explain. 'That there is a difference between generation and procession, we have taught, but what is the manner of the difference, we do not at all pretend to teach.'³⁶²

The great Augustine also professed ignorance.

However, in speaking of that transcendently excellent nature, who is able to set forth what is the difference between 'being born' and 'proceeding'? Not everything that proceeds is born although everything that is born proceeds, just as not every biped is a human being though every human being is a biped. So much I know. But I do not know, I cannot give, and I am insufficient for the task of pointing out the distinction between generation on the one hand and procession on the other.³⁶³

Yet even though no meaningful definitional distinction can be obtained between these two words, they still accurately and properly relate to us the interrelations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as they are presented to us in Scripture. The Son is *begotten* of the Father and *sends* the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and is *sent* by the Son. "The eternal *procession* from the Father and the Son is the basis for

³⁶¹ à Brakel; 174.

³⁶² Shedd; 331.

³⁶³ Quoted in Bavinck; 312.

this relationship. The Son proceeds from the Father by way of eternal generation, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son in a manner which can best be described by 'to breathe.'"³⁶⁴

Sadly, the lack of definitional distinction with regard to 'generation' and 'procession' did not stave off controversy in the Church, for à Brakel's comment above actually contains the substance of the theological conflict that ruptured the Eastern (Greek) Church from the Western (Latin) Church: the *filioque* clause. This clause, which first appeared in a modification of the Nicæan Creed in the early part of the 5th Century, stipulates that the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father *and from the Son* (Latin: *filioque*). This clause sets the Father and the Son as co-equal fonts of the Holy Spirit, which is perhaps more than Scripture will allow. Even Jesus, in the passage above, speaks of himself as 'sending' the Spirit, who 'proceeds' from the Father. A heated debate ensued between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity, with the latter accepting (and even demanding) *filioque*, and the former rejecting it. To be sure, the Greek portion of the Church never quite abandoned the Arian subordination, and it is probably that their opposition to *filioque* had less to do with the dignity of the Holy Spirit as with the exaltation of the Son to be truly co-equal with the Father.

The 'solution' of the controversy – though there has never been a rapprochement between East and West – lies in a twofold understanding of the interrelation of the Trinity. The economic hierarchy discussed above is also pertinent to this issue as well, as within the redemptive purpose and acts of God, the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit subordinate to the Son. In this sense, *filioque* does say too much, and it would be better to continue the terminology of many of the early Fathers, that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father through the Son*.

The second aspect of the problem solved lies in the nature of the communicating God (we remember the alternative terminology of economic Trinity as *revelatory* Trinity). There is universal agreement that the second Person of the Trinity is the Logos of God –

³⁶⁴ à Brakel; 172.

the *Word* of God – as is so clearly and elegantly stated in the preamble to John’s Gospel. Herein lies the crux of the matter: Christ is the *spoken* Word of God, and the Holy Spirit is the *speaking* of that Word. Even the Greek has two terms for ‘word’ that distinguish in this regard: *logos* as the spoken word, and *rhema* as the word spoken. Thus the Word and the Spirit are always mutually associated in the revelation of God coming from the Father. Moltmann summarizes this well,

The Father utters his eternal Word in the eternal breathing out of his Spirit. There is in God no Word without the Spirit, and no Spirit without the Word...Word and Spirit, Spirit and Word, issue together and simultaneously from the Father, for they mutually condition one another.³⁶⁵

The Spirit hovered over the surface of the deep, and the Word of God came forth saying, “*Let there be light.*” The Spirit descended upon Jesus as a dove, and the Word of God came from heaven saying, “*This is My beloved Son.*” Economic or revelatory Trinity, yes; but infinite and indivisible God in each eternal Person, also yes. “In the highest trinity one is as much as the three together, nor are two anything more than one; moreover they are infinite in themselves. So both each is in each, and all are in each, and each is in all, and all are in all, and all are one.”³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ Moltmann; 170.

³⁶⁶ Bavinck; 302.

Session 14 – The Divine Decree

----- Unit 14a -----

All Things According to His Purpose:

Why did God create the universe? Are the events of History predestined or happenstance? Did God ‘wind up’ the universe with physical laws and then retreat to let it run its course? What is the origin of Sin? Is there a Divine Plan for all of this? These questions are, to be sure, philosophical and not necessarily religious, but as such they reflect the common ruminations of the human mind throughout history, as men of every tongue, tribe, and nation have pondered the evidence of design and purpose in the world around them, and extrapolated those concepts into cosmical metaphysics. In some cases Pantheism developed – History *is* God; in others Determinism or Fatalism – Destiny as a blind and irresistible Force. The biblical representation, however, stands alone in positing a personal and sovereign Deity, who purposes all things in Time and Space in accordance with His most holy will. “That God has a purpose, none can deny, who attribute wisdom to him. To act without purpose is the part of a child, or an idiot.”³⁶⁷

Therefore, that such a God as biblical theism postulates should *act* is perfectly rational. All of the divine attributes are *active*; all are dynamic; all are interactive and many are transitive. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity theorizes *eternal* activity within the Godhead: there was never a time when God was inert or inactive. “*For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.’*”³⁶⁸ Indeed, it is to the *works* of God that philosophers and theologians alike turn in most of their arguments for the *existence* of God. Thus the fact that God is active is not really a matter of controversy. However, *how* He acts, and the relationship of the divine activity to that of rational creatures – particularly Man – is a matter upon which there is far less agreement, and has often caused heated debate and anathemas. It is not so much that Jewish and

³⁶⁷ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*; 102.

³⁶⁸ John 5:16-17

Christian (and even Muslim) theologians deny that God works according to a Plan, but rather the extent, the immutability, the sovereignty of that plan is called in to question. The Reformed position on this matter is summarized in the teaching of the *Decrees of God*, defined classically by the Westminster Shorter Catechism thus:

Question #7: *What are the Decrees of God?*

Answer: The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

The concept of the divine decrees – and technically it ought to be divine *decree*, singular – is admittedly a theological construct. It is, however, a reasonable means to describe the outworking of a divine plan, according to a divine purpose, from which all things ‘whatsoever’ have come to pass. The ‘decree’ represents a very important thought process whereby the student of biblical revelation, as well as of history in general, considers the correlation between the sequential events of Time and the Eternal purpose of God. The material of our observation is unfolded in time, including the interposition of God through such activities as Creation, Providence, and Redemption. But the nature of God – His attributes in particular – forbid any thought that He himself is acting through the sequences and conditions of Time. Thus the concept of the decrees is the application of the eternal and unchangeable attributes of God to the events of unfolding history. It is therefore a derived doctrine – implicit within Scripture, though not explicitly stated in so many words.

Scripture, as such, does not give us an abstract description of these decrees, but presents them to us in their historical realization. God is Lord of the entire universe, and he shows this every day in the work of creating, preserving, and governing all things.³⁶⁹

Yet even though an explicit description or definition of the decrees is not explicitly found in the pages of Scripture, the concept of a divine *purpose* – the logical precursor to a divine *decree* – is woven unmistakably throughout Holy Writ. “Scripture everywhere

³⁶⁹ Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*; 339.

affirms that whatsoever is and comes to pass is the realization of God's thought and will, and has its origin and idea in God's eternal counsel or decree."³⁷⁰ Charles Hodge most succinctly states the Reformed thought, "History in all its details, even the most minute, is but the evolution of the eternal purpose of God."³⁷¹ To human eyes, the purpose of God unfolds and evolves through the ages; to the mind of God from whence all things come, the entirety of Time and Space is but one unified thought and purpose. This is the juxtaposition of thought that so often causes us to stumble, and to err in regard to the doctrine of the decrees, or 'decree.' We conceive of the development of a purpose as the result of successive thought processes, and are painfully aware of how inevitably our own plans must be altered due to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. But surely the same cannot be true of God. Space would fail us to list all of the passages from Scripture that indicate the irrevocability of the divine purpose, but a few will suffice to dispel any consideration of contingency or change in the will and act of God.

*The counsel of the Lord stands forever;
The plans of His heart from generation to generation.* (Psalm 33:11)

*But our God is in the heavens;
He does whatever He pleases.* (Psalm 115:3)

*Whatever the Lord pleases, He does,
In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.* (Psalm 135:6)

*For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it?
And as for His outstretched hand, who can turn it back?* (Isaiah 14:27)

*...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined
according to His purpose who works all things after
the counsel of His will.* (Ephesians 1:11)

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; 369.

³⁷¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*; 538.

Thus we maintain that all things whatsoever that have come into being, or shall come into being hereafter, are unified in the systematic plan that derives from the eternal purpose of God, which is the transcript of His sublime will. "The most important aspect of the Divine decree is, that it brings all things that come to pass in space and time into a *plan*."³⁷² The self-disclosure of God admits neither of succession of thought in the divine mind, or of external influence or 'advice' according to which the divine will is altered or directed.

*Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice,
And taught Him knowledge?* (Isaiah 40:13-14)

It is significant in this regard that the use of the term 'purpose' as it related in Scripture to the outworking of the will of God, is always in the singular, as it is in Ephesians 1:11. "The term is never used in the plural number by the inspired writers; as if God had many plans, or a succession of plans. It is one entire, glorious scheme; and the date of it is from everlasting."³⁷³ To our perspective, the works of God are many, and often His announcements, covenants, prophecies, and explanations of His acts are so diverse as to tempt us to see many different decrees, many different purposes. But this is the error of Dispensationalism, and of any view of the Divine purpose that contemplates multiplicity in the Divine will. "The decrees of God, therefore, are not many, but one purpose. They are not successively formed as the contingency arises, but are all parts of one all-comprehending plan."³⁷⁴ Closer adherence to this maxim would have prevented – and continue to prevent – a great deal of error that has arisen in the Church.

³⁷² Shedd; 398.

³⁷³ Dagg; 103.

³⁷⁴ Hodge; 537.

We thus trace the purpose of God, the fount of the Divine Decree, to the will of God, which is itself the eternal outflowing of the Omniscience and Wisdom of God. That there is an order to the universe is undeniable, though men continue to strenuously argue against the root cause of such order being a supreme Intelligence. The very word 'universe,' however – as well as its Greek counterpart 'cosmos' – speaks of a unity of principle, an overarching governance that holds all that exists in a unified framework, designed according to a unified plan. Throughout human history, all con-



A. A. Hodge (1823-86)

ceptions of the universe and of life have been forced to respond to the undeniable unity and cohesiveness – the clear evidence of a plan and purpose – everywhere found in Nature. Archibald Alexander Hodge, the son of Charles Hodge, offers a summary of the only possible conclusions that may be drawn from such a consideration. “Every conceivable philosophy must ultimately found the universe upon mechanism, chance, or upon personal intelligence and will.

If mechanism be the ultimate self-existent principle out of which the universe is developed and operated, then fatalism is true. If chance be the ultimate principle, then accident, contingency, uncertainty must be in the method, and chaos the ultimate goal. If a personal, intelligent will be the ultimate principle, then Providence is the executive in time of an eternal purpose.”³⁷⁵ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, perhaps the greatest theological essayist in modern Church history, writes,

All things without exception, indeed, are disposed by Him, and His will is the ultimate account of all that occurs. Heaven and earth and all that is in them are the instruments through which He works His ends. Nature, nations, and the fortunes of the individual alike present in all their changes the transcript of His purpose.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ Hodge, A. A. *Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1990); 135.

³⁷⁶ Warfield, Benjamin B. *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company; 1968); 272.

Remarkably, theologians within the Christian tradition have introduced nuanced views of Divine Providence that actually furnish additional alternatives to the three summarized by Hodge. Alongside the traditional orthodoxy – that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass – have developed the view that God cannot know the future as it is contingent upon the free-will decisions of His rational creatures – known historically as Socinianism – and that God has voluntarily held His omniscience and omnipotence in abeyance in favor of the contingent free-will decisions of His rational creatures – which is classical Arminianism. These two erroneous views will be treated in more detail later in this session. Such aberrations of traditional orthodoxy are best refuted from the position of solid biblical revelation concerning the eternal purpose of Almighty God, to which we now turn.

----- Unit 14b -----

The Attributes of the Divine Decree:

If the decrees – or decree – is the outward manifestation of the will of God, which is itself the exact representation of the divine omniscience and wisdom, then it stands to reason that the revelation of the decree both in Scripture and throughout history will be characterized by the same attributes which reveal to us the Divine Being. In other words, we expect to find the divine decree to be **Eternal & Immutable, Sovereign & Omnipotent**, as well as **Omniscient & Good**. Too often error has crept into the Church's thoughts concerning the unfolding purpose of God, simply due to a failure to remember the attributes of the God who purposes. The Divine Thought is not less Omniscient than the Divine Being, and the Divine Will not less comprehensive than the Divine Thought. We are reminded of the Unity and Simplicity of God, and consequently realize that all His ways are but one; all His purposes unified and eternal.

Eternal & Immutable:

The nature of God as eternal, or in the biblical language, *from everlasting*, indicates not an infinite duration of time, nor an infinite sequence of thoughts and acts, but rather

a timelessness. We therefore cannot rightly imagine anything occurring to God in thought, or anything evolving from God in will or act, as not having been thought, willed, or acted upon *eternally*. Of course, we cannot fathom what that means; but we cannot conceive of God as otherwise. “Consequently the determination of his will, as well as the thoughts of his understanding, are simultaneous, not successive.”³⁷⁷ Bavinck adds,

But God’s decree is the eternally active will of God: it is the willing and purposing of God himself; it is not something accidental to God, but being God’s will in action, it is one with his essence. It is impossible to conceive of God as a being without a purpose and without an active and operative will.³⁷⁸

This concept, however, does present us with a conundrum: Did not Creation constitute a *change* or *successive event* to God? This question is perhaps unanswerable except by negation. We cannot say that God’s act of Creation is eternal with Him without saying that Creation is as co-eternal as the Son and the Holy Spirit. Conversely, we cannot posit Creation as a *change* in God without thereby denying both His immutability and His eternal perfection. Attempts to explain this positively range from the unsatisfactory to the mind-boggling. To the former belongs the distinction made between the *formation* of the decree and the *execution* of it. Shedd writes, “In the formation of the divine decree, there are no intervals; but only in the execution of it.”³⁷⁹ This is as man perceives the matter, for there can be no doubt that history has passed successively from time into time, while we are constrained by reason and revelation to consider God as above Time. But it does not answer the question as to how the execution of a Divine act does not constitute a change in the Divine Being. We know that it does not; we do not know how it does not. “Assuredly, that which God willed from eternity, He has called into being in a certain moment of time, but nothing perhaps is more difficult than to conceive of a period in which the All arose out of the Nothing.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ Shedd; 395.

³⁷⁸ Bavinck; 370.

³⁷⁹ Shedd; 395.

³⁸⁰ Van Oosterzie; 303.

The opposite end of the cognitive spectrum with regard to this question, is to basically deny the validity of the question itself. In this perspective the solution to the conundrum is to simply hold that the question of 'when' or 'what was before' cannot pertain, because Time itself was created along with the material universe. This line of argumentation may be philosophically exercising, but it is ultimately unsatisfactory due to the fact that it is *man* who is thus reasoning, and for Man 'there was a time when Time was not.' That it just so happens to be the same 'time' when Man was not does not help untie the knot. In all intellectual honesty, we are thrown back upon the negative argument that the creation of the universe from nothing was an event that occurred in time, flowing from the mind of the Eternal God without in any way constituting a change in the character and attributes of God.

The theory of a creation out of nothing, by the mere will and power of God, is then the only reasonable supposition upon which to account for the existence of the Universe. It is not an objection to this reasonableness, that it was first made known by Revelation. Being thus revealed, it appears to reason, not only to be fully accordant with all the facts and phenomena of matter, but to be the only theory which can account for them.³⁸¹

Closely associated with the eternity of the Divine Decree is the *immutability* of the purpose of God. Those within Christian theology who have theorized a changing and responding purpose of God continue to attribute to the Divine Mind the very same mode of learning that belongs to Man, that of successive reasoning. But Scripture informs us both to the nature of God willing, and to the intellect of God in the knowledge of all that He has willed to come to pass. As to the former, He is the One who "*declares the end from the beginning,*" in the prophecy of Isaiah.

*Remember the former things of old,
For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things that are not yet done,
Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure,'* (Isaiah 46:9-10)

³⁸¹ Boyce, *Abstract of Theology*; 169.

As for the nature of the Divine Mind in willing, James declares at the 'Council of Jerusalem' in Acts 15, "*Known to God from eternity are all His works.*"³⁸² Again, it is incompatible with the unity and simplicity of the Divine Nature, that the essential characteristic of the Divine Will be anything other than *one* and *unified* from eternity. To think otherwise is to confuse, as noted earlier, the *formation* of the Divine Decree with its *execution* in Time. This error began to develop in the Church about the same time as the doctrine of the Trinity was being dogmatically formulated, and the first concerted effort to refute such thinking is found throughout the writings of the renown theologian Augustine of Hippo, who was the first theologian since the Apostle Paul to treat with the doctrine of Predestination in great detail.

God willeth not one thing now, and another anon; but once, and at once, and always, he willeth all things that he willeth; not again and again, nor now this, now that; nor willeth afterwards, what before he willed not, nor willeth not, what before he willed; because such a will is mutable; and no mutable thing is eternal.³⁸³

The difficulty in regard to the immutability or changeableness of the Divine Will comes in through passages of Scripture which refer to God 'repenting' of an act done earlier, such as the creation of Man or the redemption of Israel from Egypt. Socinian and Arminian scholars demand that such passages be taken at face value, literally reflecting a 'change in mind' within the Divine Purpose. While we grant the difficulty of the verses, as they do strongly indicate a change in the Divine Plan, it is imperative that the full counsel of Scripture be applied in any exegesis of difficult passages, and also that the logical and theological ramifications of any interpretation be carefully worked out. From both analyses it should become apparent that the concept of God changing His mind is both unbiblical and untenable. Let us consider the statement just prior to the announcement of the Flood.

³⁸² The eternality of the knowledge of God is not diminished by the alternate reading of the NU text, "*says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old (eternity).*"

³⁸³ Augustine, *Confessions XII.15.18*; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110112.htm>

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6:5-8)

The context of this verse, particularly in the sequel, proves to us that the 'repentance' here attributed to God – that He was sorry that he made Man – was not an intention to completely wipe out the human race and create a new race. For Noah found favor in God's sight (and it was not just at this moment that God took notice of Noah, either). The statement concerning the Divine Sorrow, therefore, is an example of the *anthropopathism* – 'man feeling' – often used to relate to man in human terms, the thoughts and actions of God. It is evident from the context that the corruption of man due to his great longevity, had waxed great upon the earth, and that continuance in the status quo would render any remnant of human faith and righteousness absent entirely from among mankind. The Flood, as with the Expulsion of our first parents from Eden, was an act of grace whereby the possibility of redemption was preserved by divine intervention. Calvin comments,

The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sake, he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God, easily appears from this single consideration, that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen.³⁸⁴

It is also important to note that any concept of a changeable Divine Purpose renders biblical prophecy null and void at its very core. For instance, the complete removal of the human race from the earth would nullify the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15,

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.*

³⁸⁴ Calvin, John *Calvin's Commentaries: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1996); 248-249.

The chapters of Genesis preceding this announcement of God's sorrow with respect to the creation of Man, are the traces of the fulfillment of this prophecy through the lineage of Seth, the 'sons of God,' of which line Noah was a descendant. This same hermeneutic must be applied to another great controversial passage with regard to the immutability of the Divine Will, in Exodus 32, recording the narrative concerning the golden calf and Israel's apostasy.

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." (Exodus 32:9-10)

Subsequently Moses intercedes on behalf of the people of Israel, and we thus read later in the chapter, *"So the Lord relented of the harm which He said that He would do to His people."* (vs. 14) Arminians and Socinians point to this passage as proof that the will of God is mutable, and *contingent*, having been influenced by the intercession of Moses. Not only do they attribute *pique* to God - a quick and seemingly unreasonable temper - they also attribute *fickleness* to Him as well, that He should need to be reminded by Moses of His earlier promises to the patriarchs.

Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, and said: "LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, 'He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven; and all this land that I have spoken of I give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.' (Exodus 32:11-13)

The language of God in this passage serves the purpose of drawing out of Moses that zeal for the covenant and for the patriarchal promises that was so necessary for the man who would lead Israel as its first Prophet-Priest-King, and as such a notable type of the promised Messiah. To be sure, the divine anger in this instance was real, and the wrath that would subsequently be meted out to the children of Israel was both

appropriate and harsh. However, the *point* of the divine outburst was not to reflect a mutable purpose, but rather to instill in Moses, so to speak, a proper hermeneutic. It serves the same purpose to readers of this narrative throughout the ages. God could not have started a new nation through Moses without invalidating the prophetic word spoken through Jacob/Israel and recorded in Genesis 49.

*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes;
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.* (Genesis 49:10)

Moses was of the tribe of Levi, not of Judah, so that to reconstitute the nation of Israel through Moses and the Levitical lineage would be, once again, to truncate and nullify the divine promise of the Seed of Woman, who by this point in the progressive revelation of divine redemption, had been narrowed to the lineage of Judah. Thus we must conclude either that God's purpose is completely erratic and unstable, or that those passages that indicate 'repentance' on the part of God cannot be interpreted in the same manner as man changes his mind. In the second view we are confirmed by Scripture itself, where we are told by the Lord in no uncertain terms that God's purposes do not alter as do man's. Within the same context of the destruction of the descendants of Israel, the Lord speaks through the prophet Malachi,

*For I am the LORD, I do not change;
Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.* (Malachi 3:6)

The same thought was put into the mouth of Balaam, hardly an apologist for biblical truth and worship, yet compelled to testify truthfully concerning the nature of Israel's God,

*Arise, O Balak, and hear;
Give ear to me, O son of Zippor!
"God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor 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 make it good?"* (Numbers 23:18-19)

The testimony of Scripture itself, the context of the questionable passages along with the overarching covenant theology of the Bible, and the unavoidable and unacceptable logical conclusions of the opposite view, all compel us to the conclusion that the Divine Will is truly as immutable as is the Divine Nature. With that biblical conclusion as bedrock, we must build the structures of interpretation and theology thereupon, refusing to weaken the foundations of the faith by attributing a mutable will to the Divine Perfection.

Consequently, the immutable decree of God cannot be contingent upon any condition. God does not change His decree in response to man's mutability, but all human changes occur in harmony with the immutable decree of God, who by means of human mutability immutably executes the comprehensive relationship which He has decreed between the means and the end, between sin and its punishment and between godliness and the experience of salvation.³⁸⁵

Sovereign & Omnipotent:

As the attributes of the Divine Nature flow from and complement one another, so also the attributes of the Divine Will and Purpose are coordinate to each other. From the eternity and immutability of the Divine Will it follows that this will is both *sovereign* and *omnipotent* as it unfolds through the course of time. Benjamin Warfield sees particularly in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, that the sovereignty of the Divine Will is the very fabric of biblical history. He writes, "the sovereignty of the Divine will as the principle of all that comes to pass, is a primary postulate of the whole religious life, as well as of the entire world-view of the Old Testament."³⁸⁶ This phenomenon is notable in the opening sentence of the Old Testament, "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,*" and permeates all subsequent chapters and books. The unfolding of God's redemptive plan – prophesied as early as Genesis 3, as we have seen – including the vicissitudes of international relations, are all clearly placed under the sovereign control

³⁸⁵ à Brakel; 200.

³⁸⁶ Warfield; 275.

of Almighty God. Even the thoughts of a man's heart and the will of the monarch do not escape the sovereignty of the Divine Plan.

This theme is continued in the New Testament, where we find the Apostle Paul reasoning with the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill,

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' (Acts 17:24-28)

It has long been the subject of debate among theistic philosophers, the *degree* to which the Divine Being interacts with the universe that has come from His hands. Transcendentalists and Deists hold a minimalist view: God has subjected His Creation to natural laws that govern the courses of both natural and human history. Such views are inimical to the biblical doctrine of a sovereign decree, which translates theologically into the concept of Providence. Classical Arminianism does not deny to God the sovereignty of His Providence, but makes it a part of the Divine Decree to *self-limit* that sovereignty in favor of libertarian human free will. Islamic fatalism approaches the teachings of Buddhism in regard to this same free will, denying that man acts in any way free, and affirming that 'qadar' or Allah's decree governs all. But the biblical view of Providence affirms the sovereignty of the Divine Will without negating the responsibility associated with free human choices. For instance, the proverb informs us that "*The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.*"³⁸⁷ This sovereign sway extends to the highest ranks among mankind, "*The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.*"³⁸⁸ Without denying the reality of 'second causes,' nor in anyway diminishing the freedom of human choice and the responsibility incumbent

³⁸⁷ Proverbs 16:9

³⁸⁸ Proverbs 21:1

upon such choices, Scripture nevertheless presents a Providence so sovereign as to control every single event that has or will occur in the wide scope of history.

Throughout the Old Testament, behind the processes of nature, the march of history and the fortunes of each individual like alike, there is steadily kept in view the governing hand of God, working out His preconceived plan – a plan broad enough to embrace the whole universe of things, minute enough to concern itself with the smallest details, and actualizing itself with inevitable certainty in every event that comes to pass.³⁸⁹

Perhaps the most stunning and poignant instance of this double reality of sovereign Divine Will and responsible Human Choice, is found in Peter's first sermon, recorded in Acts 2.

*Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know – Him, being **delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.*** (Acts 2:22-23)

Peter failed to see any contradiction between the 'determined purpose and foreknowledge' of God, on the one hand, and the charge against the men of Israel, 'you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.' It is awesome to consider how the Divine Purpose coursed through the millennia of human history to bring about 'the fullness of time' not only in the Incarnation of the Eternal Son, but also through all of the sociological, religious, and political events and personalities, leading to the trial before Pilate and Herod, and the crucifixion. At no time did God 'miraculously' intervene in human affairs – for instance, to have Pontius Pilate appointed procurator of Palestine instead of another candidate; or to force Barabbas to steal, so that he might be available for the murderous crowd to demand instead of Jesus. At each step of the way, along both the visible and the invisible lines of human history, men's choices were made freely, and at all times were done so in accordance with the eternal Divine Decree. "We may not be able to see fully how God certainly procures the doing of such acts by free agents, still

³⁸⁹ Warfield; 276.

leaving them to act purely from their own spontaneity; but we cannot deny that He does, without overthrowing His sovereignty and foreknowledge.”³⁹⁰ This aspect of the Sovereignty of the Divine Purpose displays also the Divine Omnipotence.

The Omnipotence of the Divine Decree is noted throughout Scripture as God’s being completely able to do all His will in the heavens and on earth, and in actually accomplishing all that He wills to do. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord attributes this actuating power to His Word,

*So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.* (Isaiah 55:11)

Even the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar was brought to the humbling realization of the sovereignty of the Divine Will and Purpose,

*For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
**But He does according to His will in the host of heaven,
And among the inhabitants of the earth;**
And no one can stay His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’* (Daniel 4:34-35)

The sovereignty and omnipotence of the Divine Decree is a humbling and necessary contemplation for anyone who desires to know God as He has revealed Himself, as the Preacher exhorts, “Consider the work of God: for who can make straight what He has made crooked?”³⁹¹ They are necessary concomitants of the Divine Nature, for a Sovereign and Omnipotent God who is yet incapable of accomplishing His Will through and in the midst of His own creation, is an unbiblical and sacrilegious philosophical construct; it is certainly not the God of Scripture. The Reformed theologian holds that God does not merely *foresee* or *foreknow* the events that will take place, but that He does so on the basis of His sovereign *foreordination*: “The predestinarian maintains that the

³⁹⁰ Dabney; 217-218.

³⁹¹ Ecclesiastes 7:13

certainty of all events has a relation to the Divine omnipotence, as well as to the Divine omniscience. God not only knows all events, but he decrees them.”³⁹²

Omniscient & Good:

The error of Arminianism is perhaps one of logical order within the ‘operations’ of the Divine Mind, though this must not be taken to minimize the significance and impact of that error. The Arminian teaches that God elects on the basis of what He foresees man will do, in accordance with his libertarian free will. In this sense God *foreknows* all things, and *foreordains* on the basis of what He foreknows will come to pass. This scheme, of course, makes the Divine Decree contingent upon the libertarian free will choices of individual men, and thus utterly negates the Sovereignty of the Divine Will. The proper order, however, if we may speak of ‘order’ in the seamless and simple unity that is the Divine Mind, is to predicate the *foresight* of God upon His *foreknowledge*. God infallible foresees all that will come to pass because God has sovereignly decreed all that shall come to pass. Thus the foreknowledge of God is not a contingent responding to the libertarian free will decisions made by the creature, but rather it is the eternal and infinite knowledge of the Divine Will.

His foreknowledge, in other words, is at bottom a knowledge of His own will, and His works of providence are merely the execution of His all-embracing plan.³⁹³

Thus the Divine attribute of *omniscience* also comes into view as we study the characteristics of the Divine Decree. But what is important here is the *object* of that infinite knowledge, for at this point Calvinism and Arminianism are irredeemably divided. While the former does not deny that God’s knowledge of the entirety of universal history is perfect, simple, and infallible, the latter makes that knowledge the foundation of the decree. In a sense, the mind of God thus doubles back upon itself: having surveyed the vast expanse of created Time from the vantage point of the Eternal Now, God

³⁹² Shedd; 403.

³⁹³ Warfield; 281.

consequently 'decrees' that which He has foreseen will take place. This is particularly the case within the Arminian interpretation of *election*, which we will have cause to study in more depth in the next lesson, Lord willing.

At this point it is sufficient to remark that such a view of the Divine Omniscience, as it relates to the Divine Decree, introduces contingency into the Purpose of God, and makes of God a Cosmic Facilitator rather than an Omniscient Governor. It is the Reformed perspective, which we believe also flows from the biblical representation, that the only 'influence' that entered eternally into the formation of the Divine Decree, is the eternal Divine Will. The Apostle Paul speaks of the Spirit of the Lord as the only One who knows the thoughts of God (I Cor. 2:11), perhaps alluding to the more expansive rhetorical question put to us in Isaiah 40,

*Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge,
And informed Him of the way of understanding?* (Isaiah 40:13-14)

With regard to the Divine Knowledge of all things, stemming from the ineffable Divine Intellect, is further qualified by the Divine Wisdom, so that all things that God wills to happen manifest absolute wisdom in the fullness of His plan and purpose. This, to anticipate a later discussion, must also include the presence of sin in the universe, for to exempt anything from the Divine Decree is to introduce both imperfection and contingency, both incompatible with the true revelation of God. Contemplating the Divine Wisdom is crucial, therefore, in any properly balanced understanding of the Decree. "There is nothing irrational or capricious in God's determination. There may be much in it that passes human comprehension, and is inexplicable to the finite mind, because the Divine decree covers infinite space and everlasting time; but it all springs out of infinite wisdom."³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ Shedd; 399.

What is often incomprehensible to the Reformed scholar, is why a thorough-going doctrine of Sovereign Divine Purpose is so unsettling to so many professing believers. It is perhaps because one further attribute is necessary to round out a truly biblical portrayal of the Divine Will – that of *Infinite Goodness*. The psalmist simply says, “*Thou art good, and doest good.*”³⁹⁵ Thus it must be that the Sovereign, Omnipotent, and Omniscient Will of God, undergirding the Eternal Decree and flowing out through the Divine acts of Providence throughout the ages, must be *Good*. The joy and comfort that flow from this article of the Reformed faith is well summed up by Charles Hodge,

It would destroy the confidence of God’s people could they be persuaded that God does not foreordain whatsoever comes to pass. It is because the Lord reigns, and doeth his pleasure in heaven and earth, that they repose in perfect security under his guidance and protection.³⁹⁶

----- Unit 14c -----

Errors in Judgment:

The sovereignty and omnipotence of the Divine Will seems so clear from the pages of Scripture, at least in the Reformed reading of Scripture, that one wonders how it is that anyone who professes to be a Christian can take issue. How can it be that errors of judgment have so often entered the Church in regard to the doctrine of the Divine Decree? Though the errors are somewhat diverse, their source is but one: the attempt to philosophically ‘reconcile’ libertarian human free will with a sovereign foreknowledge and foreordination of God. Theologians descend into error when the primary goal of their reasoning becomes the protection and exaltation of libertarian free will on the part of man, at the expense of the sovereign and omnipotent Divine Will of God. That human free will and divine sovereignty are compatible will be discussed within the context of the doctrine of Predestination. Suffice it for this discussion simply to note that the biblical writers failed to see any contradiction between the two, and therefore spent no time at all trying to reconcile them. “The inspired writers are not conscious of a contradiction,

³⁹⁵ Psalm 119:68

³⁹⁶ Hodge; 545.

because they do not allude to any, or make any attempt to harmonize the two things."³⁹⁷ But theologians often feel the need to 'fill in the gaps' supposedly left by the sacred writers, and nowhere so much as in the doctrine of the Divine Decree.

The errors run the gamut from denying God's ability to know the future, free will choices of man, to making that ignorance a sovereign choice of God himself. The former view is known technically as *Socinianism* – though today its adherents are the *Open Theism* crowd; the latter is the classical response of the *Arminian*. In between there is *Molinarianism*, which espouses the *scientia media*, or 'middle knowledge' of God.

Fausto Sozzini was an Italian theologian in the Reformation era, who espoused the Anabaptist views and eventually became a leader of the Polish Brethren. He sojourned in Geneva for a time near the end of John Calvin's life, but there is no record that the two had any contact. Sozzini held a number of unorthodox views, the most enduring being his consideration that the omniscience of God could not extend to the future free will choices made by God's rational and moral creatures - angels



Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604)

and men. Hence, Sozzini taught, the sovereign Decree of God extended only to *necessary truth* – that which must happen in the future – but did not encompass *contingent truth* – that which might happen contingent upon the libertarian free will decisions of men. “[Socinians] define God's omniscience as His knowledge of all that is cognizable. All the future acts of free-agents, they say, cannot be foreknown because a multitude of them are purely contingent.”³⁹⁸ The Socinian's defense of the liberty of the free will of man is the most powerful feature in their theology. Socinianism denies “that God can know what a free agent will choose, or do, before he acts, or wills.”³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ Shedd; 401.

³⁹⁸ Dabney; 216.

³⁹⁹ Boyce; 119.

They maintain that the will is, at the moment of its choice, in such perfect equilibrium, that there are no tendencies in any direction which prevent an absolute freedom of choice. No knowledge, therefore, of the will itself, nor of the circumstances which surround its action, will enable any one to say, before it is exercised, what will be its choice. Its act, therefore, is entirely undetermined and indeterminable, until the free agent wills. It cannot even be known beforehand by God himself.⁴⁰⁰

“The Socinians rejected the doctrine of predestination in its entirety, accepted only a divine decree to grant eternal life to those who obey God’s ordinances and to punish the others, and defended the free will of man even at the expense of God’s omniscience.”⁴⁰¹ This view was powerfully refuted in the generation following Sozzini,



John Owen (1616-83)

by the great English Puritan, John Owen, and was universally condemned within the Lutheran and Reformed Churches on the continent and in Great Britain. But the false doctrine has, like all false doctrine, remained in the Church – sometimes active, sometimes dormant – from the 16th Century to the present day. *Open Theism* is a growing view among evangelical theologians of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, which to all intents and purposes is simply a modern version

of Sozzini’s arguments. God cannot know anything that cannot be known, and since the libertarian free will decisions and actions of free agents cannot be known, God cannot foreknow them. Open Theism puts a modern spin on the rehash, however, by incorporating the Divine Love into the mix, and portraying a God who so loves mankind that He refuses to oppressively interfere with their future – Open Theists teach that God and man are in this together, boldly moving hand-in-hand, as it were, into an unknown future. If the teaching were not so patently unbiblical, logically untenable, and just plain false, it would be horrifying.

⁴⁰⁰ *Idem.*

⁴⁰¹ Bavinck; 366.

The second half of the 16th Century was a hotbed of unorthodoxy, both within the Anabaptist congregations where trinitarianism was largely rejected, and within Reformed assemblies where the formulation of Calvin were severely attacked. Contemporary with Sozzini was the Dutch Calvinist James Arminius, whose teachings would posthumously become known as Arminianism. Arminius refused to join the Socinians in denying the comprehensive



James Arminius (1560-1609)

omniscience of God, but was equally unable to agree with his fellow Calvinists concerning the sovereign and absolute predestination taught by Calvin and Luther, by Augustine, and by Paul. Arminius claimed that God's predestining decree pertained not to individuals who would either believe or not believe, but rather to the *means* of salvation: faith in Christ. "[Arminius] defined predestination as the Divine decree to save in Christ, for Christ's sake, and through Christ, those concerning whom God foresaw that by virtue of prevenient grace they would believe and by virtue of consequent grace they would persevere, and to punish the others who would not believe and not persevere."⁴⁰² The essential factor in Arminian predestination is the concept of Divine *foresight*, which they generally equate to foreknowledge. God *foresees* who would believe in time, and these He elects to salvation in Christ Jesus. Thus they try to safeguard the Divine omniscience in regard to the Divine Decree, by making it contingent on the foreseen choice made by the libertarian free will of man. But this view does not actually preserve the libertarian freedom of human choice at the moment in time that the choice is made. "If [the intermediate acts of man] were certainly foreseen, their occurrence was certain; if this was certain, then there must have been something to determine that certainty; and that something was either God's wise foreordination, or a blind physical fate. Let the Arminian choose."⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² Bavinck; 366.

⁴⁰³ Dabney; 219.

There are variations upon the Arminian theme, which is not nearly as homogenous as Socinianism has proven to be across the centuries. One formulation admits that God *could* know the free will choices of man, but *chooses* not to, a self-limitation of the Divine attribute of Omniscience. Another flavor of Arminianism, is that God, while *knowing* all of the free will choices that men would make in time, did not *decree* all of them, but only the ones that are essential to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This latter view is an attempt by the Arminian to put sufficient distance between God and the advent of sin into the world, as to result in mental comfort for the theologian and the believer. This issue of sin will be addressed in a later lesson, as it cannot be so easily evaded.

The upheaval of the Protestant Reformation shook the foundations of the Roman



Luis de Molina (1535-1600)

Catholic Church, so it ought not be surprising that unorthodox views grew out of that communion in the 16th Century as well as from the Protestant nursery. The Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina contributed his own effort to the attempt at reconciling the sovereignty of the Divine Will with the libertarian free will of Man. Molinism, the theological perspective that derives from Molina's teachings, holds that God, while not knowing infallibly

What choice an individual will make, does know infallibly what choice any and every man *would* make given a particular set of circumstances. Molinists appeal to passages such as Matthew 11:23, where Christ posits the repentance of Sodom if the ancient Sodomites had been given the same revelation then being manifested to the people of Capernaum.

Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this

day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."
(Matthew 11:20-24)

This perspective suffers the same fate as the Arminian's *divine foresight*: if God infallibly knows the free will choice that any man will make given a certain set of circumstances, and omnipotently brings about those circumstances in the lives of every man – as the Molinist teaches – than the subsequent choice made by the man is no less certain than if it were foreordained from eternity past, as the Calvinist holds. Although the coexistence of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility will forever remain a theological and philosophical conundrum, that they are both taught clearly in Scripture cannot be denied, and cannot be used in any way to diminish the absolute sovereignty and omnipotence of the Divine Decree.

The Scriptures recognize both the sovereignty of God, and the free agency, and accountability of man. Consciousness assures us of the latter. The nature of God...proves the former. The Bible makes no attempt to reconcile the two.⁴⁰⁴

As the examples and legacies of Sozzini, Arminius, and Molina show, nor should we.

⁴⁰⁴ Boyce; 118.

Session 15 – Creation & Providence

“God is in the atom just as really and effectually as in the planet. He is in the unobserved sighing of the wind in the wilderness as in the earthquake which overthrows a city full of living men, and his infinite wisdom and power are as much concerned in the one event as in the other.”
(A. A. Hodge)

----- Unit 15a -----

God Created the Heavens and the Earth:

But why? Biblical Theism rejects the ancient Greek notion of the Divine Being as distant and uninvolved in the creation of a material universe – the work of emanations such as the *demiurge*. Rather in Scripture we find God inexorably linked as the original author of ‘all that is created,’ not only in the opening verse of the Bible, but also emphatically in many others.

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (John 1:3)

Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created. (Revelation 4:11)

*Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens;
Praise Him in the heights! Praise Him, all His angels;
Praise Him, all His hosts! Praise Him, sun and moon;
Praise Him, all stars of light! Praise Him, highest heavens,
And the waters that are above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the LORD,
For **He commanded and they were created.**
He has also established them forever and ever;
He has made a decree which will not pass away.*
(Psalm 145:1-6)

This last reference also speaks of a ‘decree’ establishing the reality and durability of all that God has created. Thus it is common within Systematic Theology texts to speak of Creation in the context of the Divine Decree, as it represents the greatest extrinsic outworking of the Divine Will, the venue in which the Divine Purpose finds expression. But rarely do systematic theologians ask the question that most philosophers, almost all

agnostics, all atheists, and many regular theistic believers ask: *Why did God Create?* When asked within the classical Reformed tradition, the answer is both biblically sound and intellectually unsatisfying: *Because He so willed.* This, of course, flows from the very concept of a Divine Decree; or perhaps the concept of a Divine Decree is deduced from the reality of a Creation. Either way, the two are inextricably linked in the human mind: God *created* the universe because God *willed to create* the universe.

Digressions from this strict testimony of Scripture, that God has caused all things to happen according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), often – as we have come to expect – arrive at error. It is a popular modern misconception that God created the universe so that He would have objects on which to set His love, though we have seen that the Godhead is perfectly loving within itself, needing no additional participant to ‘perfect’ the divine love. Listen to the words of the Lord himself on this score,

Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.
(John 17:24)

The eternal bliss of the Triune God also rules out the silly notion that God created the universe because He was lonely. The notion that the All-sufficient One should be less than completely complacent in His own company, as it were, is manifestly ludicrous. It is dangerously ridiculous whenever man conceives of himself as in any way adding to the perfection that God is in himself, as the young man Elihu states in his classic rebuke of the patriarch Job,

*If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against Him?
And if your transgressions are many, what do you do to Him?
If you are righteous, what do you give to Him,
Or what does He receive from your hand?
Your wickedness is for a man like yourself,
And your righteousness is for a son of man.* (Job 35:6-8)

While the Bible is replete with passages that confirm to us the love of God toward Man and toward Creation, nowhere do we find support for the notion that God



John Piper (b. 1946)

is *dependent* upon His Creation, or in any way *needful* of our company. John Piper says, “When God created the world he did not create out of any need or any weakness or any deficiency. He created out of fullness and strength and complete sufficiency. As Jonathan Edwards said, ‘Tis no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain that it is inclined to overflow’”⁴⁰⁵ There are indeed many passages that indicate that even when man does ‘good work’ in the name of God, he still does nothing *for God*. For instance, the Lord clearly indicates that the proper sacrifices offered under the Levitical system are not of the nature of necessity to Him.

*I do not reprove you for your sacrifices,
And your burnt offerings are continually before Me.
I shall take no young bull out of your house
Nor male goats out of your folds.
For every beast of the forest is Mine,
The cattle on a thousand hills.
I know every bird of the mountains,
And everything that moves in the field is Mine.
If I were hungry I would not tell you,
For the world is Mine, and all it contains.* (Psalm 50:8-12)

Scripture does, however, give us more to go on than just the Divine Will in Creation, though that is the ultimate foundation for why God created the universe. But one aspect of the Divine Decree – perhaps the most important aspect of the Divine Decree – is that its goal is the exaltation of the glory of God, and of His grace. Thus we deduce that one reason why God created the universe is so that the majesty of His perfections might be expressed and worshiped by others outside of the Godhead. This was not *necessary*, but it was *desirable*. For in this manner, as Jonathan Edwards put it, the fountain of divine perfection *overflows*, and multitudes are blessed by it. Two of the divine perfections that are manifested *par excellence* by the work of Creation, are the Divine

⁴⁰⁵ <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/why-did-god-create-the-world>

Power and the Divine Goodness. Wilhelmus à Brakel writes, "The eternal God, being desirous to reveal Himself and to communicate His goodness, has according to His eternal purpose and by His wisdom and omnipotence, created the universe and all things belonging to it."⁴⁰⁶ Van Oosterzie adds, "In this light, the world in its genesis presents the scene on which the Omnipotence, Wisdom, and Goodness of God is displayed; originally good, and perfectly adapted to its destination."⁴⁰⁷ This is, of course, no more than the Apostle Paul writes with regard to the knowledge of God that is undeniable – though nevertheless denied – by Man,

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made... (Romans 1:20)

In the Old Testament, the Creation becomes the go-to argument, as it were, employed by God in His tet-à-tet with the idols embraced by Israel in her apostasy. "God, in a multitude of places, claims creation as His characteristic work, by which His Godhead is manifested, and His superiority shown to all false gods and idols."⁴⁰⁸

A few instances will suffice to prove the point.

*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?
Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?* (Isaiah 40:12-13)

Thus you shall say to them, "The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens." It is He who made the earth by His power, Who established

⁴⁰⁶ à Brakel; 265.

⁴⁰⁷ Van Oosterzie; 317.

⁴⁰⁸ Dabney; 251.

the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens.
(Jeremiah 10:11-12)

*For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
**For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.**
Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.* (Psalm 96:4-6)

This manifestation and exaltation of the Divine Perfections carries on from Creation into the second phase of God's continuing work, Providence, which will be treated more fully later in this lesson. But it is cogent to the current topic that we recognize that all that God does – which is all that God purposed to do – has as its fundamental and ultimate motive the *purpose* or '*good pleasure*' of God, and for its ultimate end and goal, the *glory of God* in all His fullness. "It is equally self-evident and certain that the whole of God's providence in every part of it must be an expression of his essential perfections, of infinite wisdom and power, and of absolute righteousness and benevolence."⁴⁰⁹

Excursus: The Creation of the Angels

One of the greatest mysteries incumbent upon the biblical revelation of Creation is the reality and advent of the angelic host – the creation of purely spiritual beings. They are not enumerated among the works of the Six Days in Genesis Chapter 1, and appear in the Bible without prior explanation. "Even with the most unreserved admission of the credibility of the narratives in the sacred history, one must admit that the appearances of Angels present a too fleeting, sporadic, mysterious character, for us to build definite theories upon them."⁴¹⁰ Of course this fact does not keep theologians, preachers, and authors from attempting just that. That the angelic host – comprising both 'good' and 'evil' angels, as well as such creatures as the cherubim and seraphim – are part and parcel

⁴⁰⁹ Hodge, A. A.; 36.

⁴¹⁰ Van Oosterzie; 313.

with the overall revelation of Scripture cannot be denied. And it must be admitted by even a cursory reading of the Bible that these creatures are presented without apology as without introduction. W. G. T. Shedd references Job 38:7 as an allusion that the angels were created prior to the Creation narrative of Genesis 1,

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding,
Who set its measurements? Since you know.
Or who stretched the line on it?
On what were its bases sunk?
Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?* (Job 38:4-7)

It is agreed by virtually all Christian writers throughout the millennia, as well as their counterparts in Jewish Rabbinism, that the angels were already in existence when the work of Creation began on the earth and in the heavens. The actual age of the angels is, of course, unknown and unknowable, but the apparent fact that the angelic hosts predate the 'Hexahemeron' – the Six Days – is important to students of the Scriptures in that it proves the existence of created beings prior to the organization of the cosmos as we know it. "Hence, it is best to say with Calvin, that the age of the angels is unrevealed, except that they are older than the world and man."⁴¹¹

To what purpose do we find the creation of the angels? Again, we ascribe the motivation of their creation to the good pleasure of God, to the Divine Will and Divine Purpose. But is there any indication of what role, so to speak, the angelic hosts play in the overarching theme of God's Decree? They are presented to us in Scripture as of awesome power, and of majesty far in excess of that possessed by Man. But they are also revealed to us as those who do not fully comprehend the work that God is doing, and who "long to look into" what the Spirit of the Lord is revealing to Man concerning the consummate work of God.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Dabney; 265.

⁴¹² | Peter 1:12

Without being dogmatic, and with no intention of being irreverent, we may say that the existence of the angelic host is essential to the 'plot' of the metanarrative being unfolded by God throughout Creation's history. There is a cosmic conflict that has erupted in the spiritual realm, one that has overflowed to the physical, and one that pits the most powerful angelic being with the eternal Son of God. "From first to last, the favorite representation of the world's history is, that it is the arena for a struggle between two kingdoms - Christ's and Satan's."⁴¹³ By the inscrutable wisdom of God - and to an extent that will not be revealed until the consummation of the age, if then - the conquest of the evil that has pervaded the purely spiritual realm will be accomplished by One who has partaken of both the spiritual and the physical realm, as was foretold. In the classic passage from Psalm 8, it is generally regarded that the word in verse 5, the Hebrew *elohim*, refers not to the Almighty God, but rather to 'gods,' or angels.

*What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!
You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet...* (Psalm 8:4-6)

What is clear from this passage, of course, is that God has reserved the ultimate place in His 'scheme' of Time and Space to Man - in particular the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Those who are Christ's from the tribe of men are also included in this triumphal summing up of all things, including those whose origin and age remain a mystery to us. The Apostle Paul enigmatically promises believers in Rome that "*the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*" (Rom. 16:20), and the author of the epistle to the Hebrews joins the redeemed of the human race with the angels who "*kept their first estate*" in one holy and immortal congregation.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in

⁴¹³ Dabney; 271.

heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.
(Hebrews 12:22-24)

Perhaps all that we can say regarding the purpose underlying the existence of the angelic host – other than “*It seemed good in Thy sight*” – is that it further displays the richness of the creative genius of God, and will ultimately redound to His glory to a degree that would not be possible but for their existence. Maybe they are the chorus, as in the ancient Greek productions, and part of that “*great cloud of witnesses*” who look on. Whatever their *raison d’être*, we can be sure that their being is of greater worth to the fruition of the Divine Purpose than their not-being, and that all attempts that have been made to rationalize them out of existence cannot but have a seriously detrimental effect on our understanding and appreciation of that Purpose.

----- Unit 15b -----

Divine Providence:

Upon the accounting of the dead in the English victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt, William Shakespeare gives us this dialogue between King Henry V and his faithful Welsh captain, Llewellyn,

Llewellyn: Is it not lawful, an please your majesty, to tell
how many is killed?

King Henry: Yes, captain; but with this acknowledgement,
That God fought for us.

Llewellyn: Yes, my conscience, he did us great good.

“With this acknowledgement, that God fought for us.” Here is the classic – perhaps even more classic since from the pen not of a theologian, but of an entertainer – understanding of Divine Providence: that God the transcendent Creator is also the immanent Governor of all His Creation, and works in the affairs of mankind to do His will. This was the orthodox Christian view of the Divine Government, a continuing aspect of the Divine Decree, from the earliest decades of the Church, through the Middle

Ages and Reformation, until the 18th Century Enlightenment enthroned Rationalism as the new deity. Modern emphasis on the libertarian free will of man, along with the advent of the Social Gospel in the 19th Century, have tended to push the doctrine of Divine Providence distinctly into the background. But it is the biblical view that is captured in the pithy saying of Augustine, "To make well and to take good care of what is made both belong to God."⁴¹⁴

The logic of Providence is inescapable when one remembers the principle that it is only God who has life in Himself; He is the only self-existent Being. Therefore, nothing that has come into being can possibly have the capacity to sustain that being, having of necessity received it, they must continue to receive it if being is to continue. This is Divine Providence. "Nothing that is created ex nihilo is self-sustaining."⁴¹⁵ Therefore the two common categories into which Providence is divided for the purpose of study, are: *Preservation* and *Government*. God preserves the being of that which He has created, for just as long as He desires; and God governs and orders the behavior and history of His Creation, according to His eternal purpose. As to the first, *Preservation*, we have the testimony of Scripture from both testaments. The psalmist writes,

*They all wait for You to give them their food in due season.
You give to them, they gather it up;
You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.
You hide Your face, they are dismayed;
You take away their spirit, they expire and return to their dust.
You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;
And You renew the face of the ground.* (Psalm 104:27-30)

Although such a passage as this is found within the Wisdom literature of the Bible, and is undoubtedly poetic, yet it is poetry founded on truth. It is not a denial of second causes – the psalmist was just as aware of how animals eat and live and reproduce as our modern biologists and zoologists – but rather it was an acknowledgement of the reality that no living creature whose being is derived can have the source of that life within

⁴¹⁴ Quoted in Turretin; 490.

⁴¹⁵ Shedd; 527.

themselves. All derivative life is dependent life, and the psalmist is doing no more than offering up praise to the One from whom all derivative life receives continuance and sustenance. The writer to the Hebrews more specifically assigns this power to the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, in a manner quite similar to the Apostle Paul (*cp.* Col. 1:17). Notice both the divinity of Creation as well as that of Providence in the opening verses of Hebrews:

*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, **through whom also He made the world.** And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and **upholds all things by the word of His power.***

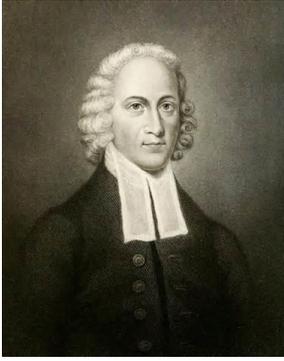
(Hebrews 1:1-3)

This 'upholding' of all things represents the *preservation* aspect of Divine Providence. Some renown theologians have supposed that the Divine power in preservation of the universe is an act of continuing creation. This was taught by no less an intellect than Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest philosopher born to date on American soil. Edwards reasoned that the created being does not possess the ability even to sustain its own existence in the next moment, but is 'continuously created' by the direct intervention of God.

God's upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing, at each moment, because its existence at this moment is not merely in part from God, but wholly from him; and not in any part, or degree, from its antecedent existence.⁴¹⁶

Very few theologians have followed Edwards in this line of thinking, and with good reasons. First, there is no biblical support for it; it is pure speculation. Scripture does not elaborate on the mechanism of Divine Preservation; it merely asserts the fact of

⁴¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards quoted in *A Puritan's Mind*; <http://www.apuritansmind.com/the-christian-walk/the-doctrine-of-continuous-creation-by-dr-c-matthew-mcmahon/>



Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

it. Second, it defies human experience. We have memories; each successive moment in our lives is inextricably linked with the others – including our ‘memories’ of the future: our ambitions and dreams. Such recollection of past and anticipations of the future would be nonsensical under the scheme of continuous creation. Third, it diminishes the awesome significance of the New Birth, which is far more than

just God momentarily creating as He did the previous moment and will do again in the next moment. Finally, it veers dangerously close to Pantheism, by connecting God’s act of Creation and the continued existence of Creation so close together (uniting them, really) and to blur the lines of distinction between the Creation and creation itself. It is better that we resist the temptation to elucidate the manner in which God sustains all things, accepting that He does, and that He does so *“by the word of His power.”*

One aspect of Edwards’ theory, however, warrants attention. That is, his focus on the immediacy of Divine Preservation as it pertains the most minute particle of being – momentary existence. Although the working out of his theory introduces unwarranted and dangerous speculation, it is nonetheless founded on the biblical notion that God *sustains* all things, and not just ‘the big things.’ The days of a man’s life, the thoughts of his mind, and even the hairs upon his head are all subjects of Divine Preservation and Providence. It is a ridiculous, as well as unbiblical, idea held by Arminians, that God only intervenes in the course of history with regard to ‘major’ issues – like the reign of Pharaoh in the days of Moses, or the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate in the days of Jesus. Robert Louis Dabney refutes the logic of this thinking by showing that there is no ‘general’ or major event that is not made up of multitudes of specific, minor ones.

It is a mere illusion to talk of a certain direction of the general, which does not embrace the particulars; for a general class is nothing, when separated from the particulars which compose it, but an abstraction of the mind. Practically, the general is only produced by producing all the specials which compose it...unless His care extended to every event

specially, it could not effectuate any, certainly. To exercise a general providence without a special, is as though a man should form a chain without forming its links.⁴¹⁷

That God should preserve His Creation, and that in the most minute detail, flows logically from the doctrine of the Divine Decree. Founded in the wisdom and enforced by the omnipotence of God, the decree cannot fail of accomplishment; God will not fail in attaining His eternal purpose. To introduce a concept of independency within Creation – that somehow derivative being now possesses self-sustaining power – is to also introduce contingency into the accomplishment of the Divine Purpose, which is both untenable and unbiblical. Thus van Oosterzie writes,

The existence of this Providence is indubitable, its domain unlimited, its manifestation manifold, and its mode of operation in many respects raised above human comprehension; but its final aim, the realization of the Divine plan with regard to the world, and the believing recognition thereof, is of the highest significance, alike for the Theological mode of thinking, and the spiritual life...For religion presupposes not merely an original, but also a continued and reciprocal relation between God and man.⁴¹⁸

This continuing and ‘reciprocal relation between God and man,’ at least as far as mankind is cognizant of it, pertains more particularly to the Divine Government than to the Divine Preservation. With this second aspect of Providence, we affirm that God not only preserves and sustains His Creation, He also orders it. “The Government of all things is that operation of God’s will, whereby – as Lord over His own works – He sovereignly and freely controls at once the whole organism of Creation and its particular parts.”⁴¹⁹ This government of God over the universe may be analyzed in three broad categories: Natural Law, Moral Law, and Miracles. The first dictates the normal processes and course of the physical universe; the second the normal conduct and behavior – including the transgressions thereof – within human society; and the third touching upon the more immediate and direct intervention of God into these affairs, particularly in relation to divine revelation.

⁴¹⁷ Dabney; 277.

⁴¹⁸ Van Oosterzie; 326-327.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*; 335.

It cannot be too strenuously asserted that biblical Christianity is by no means inimical to modern Science. Indeed, the very opposite is true, as the doctrines of God and Creation in Scripture provide an immovable foundation upon which the investigations of Science can be built with confidence (and cannot under any other paradigm). Thus the Christian scientist is merely "thinking God's thoughts after Him" when he or she investigates the physical world and attempts to elucidate the 'laws' governing that world. "The government of God in the physical universe is administered by means of physical laws. A law of nature is the manner in which the material elements invariably act and react upon each other, under the present arrangement of Divine providence."⁴²⁰ The steadfastness of the providential natural laws makes Science possible, for the alternative would be a capricious and arbitrary universe, incapable of systematic study and formulation, much less of scientific prediction.

Sadly this truism is no longer held by the majority in Western society, as Science has developed a life of its own and has been cut from the umbilical cord of Theology from whence it grew. But perhaps even more serious is the modern denial of *Moral Law* governing human society. Paul speaks of an unwritten law observed by the Gentiles (Romans 2) that constitutes for them as powerful and as obliging a statute as the Mosaic Law was to the Jews. This is the universal law of right, imprinted upon the soul of every man by virtue of conscience. Beyond this most specifically moral of codes, there is also the law of behavior – that aspect of Divine Government that specifies the normal outcome to be expected by specific behavior. A great deal of what is called Wisdom Literature pertains to this type of the governance of the world: "*If a man tills, he shall not lack for food,*" for instance. These are not paradigms that govern only religious people, they are applicable to all mankind in a general, normative sense. And just as the normal patterns of physical laws can be interrupted, so also can these normative patterns of human social

⁴²⁰ Shedd; 530-531.

behavior. But generally-speaking, that a particular behavior cause will produce a consistent effect, is a manifestation of Divine Providence in the realm of Moral Law.⁴²¹

One ramification of the teaching of Divine Providence in the life and behavior of the believer – especially the Calvinist – is the repudiation of the concept of ‘luck.’ The idea of luck pertains to the notion of Chance or Fate, and is inimical to the biblical teaching on Providence, whereby God controls all particular events. “Unbelief speaks of blind Fortune, faith confesses ‘Nothing by accident, and nothing without an aim.’”⁴²² This is not by any means to say that man can at all times (or even often) understand the workings of Providence, even after the fact. Van Oosterzie writes, “In whatever domain, however, the manifestation of God’s Providence takes place, *the manner of its operation* in many respects surpasses human comprehension.”⁴²³

This is true in the day-to-day stuff of life, but it is even more apparent in the realm of the miraculous. It is hardly a revelation to state that belief in miracles has taken in on the chin since the Enlightenment, though the term itself is still bandied about with nauseating frequency by professing Christians. It is almost as hard to find sane discourse on the topic of miracles as it is on the topic of angels, the pendulum swinging between outright denial of them *en toto*, to the expectation of the miraculous at every turn of life. In many circles, too, the word has become synonymous with an favorable outcome of events, which is another example of erroneous thought on the matter. But miracles – undeniably upon the most unprejudiced reading of the Bible – are an aspect of Divine Providence that cannot be categorized within either the Natural/Physical or the Moral governance of the universe, at least not within the *normal* operations within those two realms.

Fundamentally, miracles are examples of God’s sovereign Providence in its *immediate* application to the affairs of Creation. This means that He intervenes *without intermediate means* to effect His intended purpose, whereas the same purpose might

⁴²¹ The Book of Proverbs presents the *normative* operation of Providence in this sphere; the Book of Job present the *unusual* operation of Providence, showing that God, the Law-giver, is not Himself enslaved to those laws.

⁴²² Van Oosterzie; 337.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*; 329 (italics original).

otherwise be accomplished along the lines of normal physical or moral instrumentation. Miracles do, however, often transcend the normal physical and moral laws, though it would be incorrect to say that miracles violate those laws. Dabney offers this definition: "We must hold fast to the old doctrine; that a miracle is a phenomenal effect above all the powers of nature; properly the result of supernatural power; i.e., of God's immediate power which He has not regularly put into any second causes, lower or higher."⁴²⁴ A. A. Hodge adds to this,

The 'miracle,' therefore, in the sense in which we now discuss it, should be defined thus: - (1) An event (2) occurring in the material world, (3) obvious to the senses, (4) of such a nature that it can be rationally referred only to the immediate act of God as its direct cause, (5) accompanying a teacher of religion sent from God, (6) and designed to authenticate his divine commission.⁴²⁵

Items (5) and (6) of Hodge's definition are an advancement over Dabney's, but represent traditional Reformed thinking on the subject. By recognizing that true miracles are intended to authenticate divine revelation, the Reformed scholar is not attempting to rule out the possibility of the miraculous in any and all events of life, but merely to show that, biblically, the expectation of miracles as the normative behavior of God vis-à-vis Man and Creation, is untenable. There were but three 'seasons' of consistent miracles recorded in the Bible, all of which pertained to a specific advancement in the progressive self-disclosure of God through revelation: the era of Moses and his immediate successor, Joshua; the era of the prophets Elijah and Elisha; and the era of Jesus Christ accompanied by His successors, the apostles. It is worth noting that the majority of the prophets about whom we read in Scripture have no miracle attested to their name or work, a fact also true regarding the Davidic kings. It is a fact of biblical history, as it should be a fact of common logic, that miracles were *unusual* in the extreme, and were meant to signify and authenticate divine teaching. "From their very nature miracles must be to the last degree exceptional. If they were frequent, or if they could be accounted for by natural causes or

⁴²⁴ Dabney; 283.

⁴²⁵ Hodge, A. A., 51.

analogies, they would cease to be miracles. Their frequent or sporadic occurrence would reduce the phenomenal world to chaos, would confuse the reason and paralyze the activity of man, and obscure the providence of God."⁴²⁶

This does leave one very important facet of the believer's life that is called into question by the doctrine of Divine Providence: the act of prayer. In an analogous manner to the way some regard the doctrine of Divine Election as inimical to evangelism, it is often viewed that a doctrine of absolute Divine Providence destroys the basis and motivation for prayer. But this reasoning is only valid if one assumes that prayer can accomplish one or both of two things: either informing God of something He does not yet know, or of getting God to alter His purpose and plan according to the desires of the supplicant. Neither of these are tenable thoughts with regard to God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture. As to the first, Jesus Himself assured His disciples that their Father in heaven already knows what they need before they ask.

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. (Matthew 6:7-8)

The second idea, that prayer somehow alters God's plan, is contrary to the Divine Attribute of Immutability, derogatory to the Divine Attributes of Omniscience and Wisdom, and simply contrary to the biblical self-disclosure of God. We have already seen in the narrative of God's intending to destroy the children of Israel and create a new nation out of Moses, that this was not His intention at all, as it would have upended Messianic prophecy dating from the patriarchs. We have also read through the prophet Isaiah that God seeks and accepts no 'counsel' in regard to the formulation (if we may so state it) of His purpose, but rather consults only the infinite wisdom of His own mind and will. It is truly inconceivable that finite man could influence the will of God, and certainly not in a positive way.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*; 55-56.

So what does prayer accomplish? What is its purpose, and how does it fit in with a healthy, biblical consideration of Divine Providence? Two things can be said positively, if cautiously, with regard to prayer. First, prayer is the ordained means by which God has purposed to provide to His people what they need. The fact that the Father already knew the disciples needs before they asked, did not in any way mitigate against their praying for those things, at least not to the Lord Jesus, who Himself spent many hours in prayer. It is fundamental to Reformed thinking that God's sovereign decree pertains as much to the means as to the ends of things, and one of those means is prayer. It remains a mystery, to be sure, but God intends – even decrees – that His children *ask* for the very things He intends to give them.

Additionally we may say of prayer that it is the one facet of the Christian discipline best suited to conforming the mind of the believer to the mind of God. In a sense, this was exemplified by the Lord Himself in Gethsemane, through His heartfelt and realistic prayer, *"If it be possible...yet not My will but Thine be done."* This is the proper attitude for all believers in prayer, for it is not faith but presumption to 'claim' in prayer anything that has not been promised in Scripture. However, the believer who petitions the Father with an heart of willing submission to the Divine Will, finds over time that his or her own will is becoming more and more conformed to that of the Heavenly Father. Prayers that are answered are thus valued no more than those that are 'rejected,' for the mind and heart of the supplicant is brought nearer to the mind and heart of God no less by the one as by the other.

Session 16 – Sin & Salvation

“God knew that it pertained more to his most almighty goodness, even to bring good out of evil, than not to permit evil to be.”

(Augustine)

----- Unit 16a -----

Divine Providence Over Sin:

The topics of the Divine Decree, Providence, the Purpose of God, and so forth, are rarely discussed in the abstract. Rather it is the case, and the controversy, that the works of God are usually debated in the context of two conundrums: first, the nature of God and the existence of evil in the world; second, the nature of Predestination or Election. The first of these is found on the battle line between believers and unbelievers; the second within the ranks of professing believers. Neither is capable of definitive statement, and so both are perennial sources of heated disagreement. One might consider it the better course to preserve peace and harmony among friends and family, and within the Church, to avoid the topics altogether. But the believer is constantly confronted with the first issue from the unbelieving world, and cannot avoid the second one when reading the Scriptures.

The first question: ‘How can the concept of an Almighty and Good God be harmonized with the presence of evil in the world,’ falls into the realm of apologetics known as Theodicy. It is a broader category than just the correlation of God and sin, but it is this issue upon which most has been written. “We give this name to every formal attempt to justify the government of God against the objections which are brought against it from different standpoints.”⁴²⁷ For the Christian theologian, the Theodicy is an attempt to reconcile two realities: God, and Sin. Hence the concept of Theodicy requires the acknowledgement of both. It is an argument that can only flow from the theistic point of view, and can only have meaning within a moralistic framework of the universe. In a

⁴²⁷ Van Oosterzie; 347.

philosophical sense, the two concepts of God and of Sin are inseparable (this is by no means to make the latter the direct effect of the former).

The reasoning is thus. If we deny the reality of Sin, as much of the eastern religions do and evolutionary materialism does, then we of necessity deny the reality of God. For Sin stems from a moral distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. If that distinction does not exist, or if that distinction has no moral content (i.e., the Yin and Yang of Taoism), then the contrary words in each set bear no real meaning; they are not really opposites. If, then, we deny the real distinction between 'good' and 'evil,' we at the same time deny the being of the One who makes that distinction, which is God. Conversely, if we first deny the reality of God, we of necessity deny the reality of moral obligation, for one can only be obligated morally to a moral superior, and for Man that would have to be God. If moral obligation is done away with, the concept of sin is eviscerated; Sin no longer exists. We conclude, therefore, that the reality of Sin cannot be divorced from the reality of God, though the harmonizing of the two still presents a daunting challenge.

The first rational step in taking up this challenge is to acknowledge that it is insuperable; the Theodicy of God and Sin is incapable of solution, at least in this realm and by finite human reason. "The problem of the world will first be fully solved when the accomplishment of the plan of the world – which we look for on sure grounds – is at length seen."⁴²⁸ However, based on the message of the Book of Job, we must recognize the caveat to this statement, that the final resolution of the issue may not be revealed to Man even at the consummation of the age. But we glean some hope, as well as the assurance that even the concept of Theodicy is at least found in Scripture, when we read Psalm 73. The psalmist's perspective here is the apparent contradiction in the fact that the wicked often prosper while the righteous suffer; a situation that seems to negate the promises of God. The psalmist confesses his struggle with doubt.

*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.*

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*; 346.

*For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* (Psalm 73:2-3)

Throughout the psalm we hear a familiar refrain, the experience of believers throughout history who long to see the righteousness of God vindicated and the wickedness of mankind punished. The psalmist, however, is not given an inspired answer, except to defer the question until the final judgment.

*If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.
When I thought how to understand this,
It was too painful for me –
**Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end.*** (Psalm 73:15-17)

Far from being wrong to 'do' Theodicy, we may conclude from this Psalm that Theodicy is only properly done from the perspective of faith. Van Oosterzie writes, "The value of the Theodicée of course depends entirely upon the *standpoint* from which it is attempted. From that of Reason and Experience alone, a satisfactory solution cannot possibly be expected...It remains a difficulty to us, 'until we go into the sanctuary of God.'"⁴²⁹

One important point to consider in this light, is that we cannot attempt Theodicy if it is in our mind to vindicate the honor of God. We can no more defend the Divine honor than we can comprehend the Divine work, and we should give off trying. "We are often, in appearance at least, exceedingly anxious to relieve the character of God from false aspersions; but we may safely leave him to vindicate himself."⁴³⁰ We make this attempt perhaps to negate the argument of the agnostic or atheist, or perhaps to strengthen our own faith, as did the psalmist, but not to vindicate the Divine Decree.

*Thus my heart was grieved,
And I was vexed in my mind.*

⁴²⁹ Van Oosterzie; 347.

⁴³⁰ Dagg; 132.

*I was so foolish and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.
Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You hold me by my right hand.
You will guide me with Your counsel,
And afterward receive me to glory.* (Psalm 73:21-24)

The sub-concepts or questions that attend this debate are indeed troublesome. For instance, 'Why did God permit evil to enter His perfect Creation, if He could have prevented it?' Or, 'How does God *permitting* evil differ from God *causing* evil, seeing that nothing comes to pass apart from the Divine Will?' Or 'If God, knowing that under the Providential circumstances ordained Man would fall, yet ordained those circumstances to the end that Man did fall, how can Man still be held responsible?' There are, perhaps, no answers to these questions that would satisfy every doubter, nor even every believer. James Boyce writes quite frankly, "One question as to his connection with sin no man can answer, namely, why he has allowed its existence at all."⁴³¹ Van Oosterzie adds, "The co-existence of God and of *moral evil* remains, after all that has been just said, assuredly the most difficult of all problems."⁴³² But as with all Theology, even Theodicy ends in Doxology for those who attempt in faith.

The mysterious element in the Divine government on its part curbs the pride of man, calls forth faith with its precious fruits, and justifies the hope which it awakens in the promised revelation of the future.⁴³³

One process of logically analyzing the co-existence of God and of sin, is to consider them as complete and independent antagonists. In other words, to argue that the advent of evil in the universe was *not* part of the Divine Decree, but rather was the work solely of Satan, the adversary. This approach does have the merit of removing the reality of evil as far as possible from the causality of God, but it is fraught with difficulties just as great as that of making God the immediate cause of Sin. First, it fails to explain how it came to

⁴³¹ Boyce; 225.

⁴³² Van Oosterzie; 348.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*; 351.

be that Satan – or any other moral agent, for Sin is a moral act – *fell* in the first place. When once we acknowledge that God created all things that have been created, which we must do on the clear testimony of Scripture, then we also acknowledge that any conceivable moral agent who might have introduced sin into God’s Creation, was himself a creation of God. Thus blaming Satan for the ultimate causality of Sin is analogous to the evolutionist saying that organic life began in outer space – it merely moves the question further away from Man (or Earth), but does not answer it.

Furthermore, to say that Sin could enter God’s Creation apart from His will – which must be the case if the advent of evil was separate from His Decree – is tantamount to saying that there exists a power at least co-equal with and independent of Almighty God. That this negative power could corrupt the perfect Creation of God, and God being incapable of stopping this corruption (or even *knowing* about it until it occurred) is a conclusion that is worse than the problem. For it introduces the potentiality of God *not* being able to accomplish His entire will, which will includes the salvation of the elect in Christ Jesus. Those who advocate this view, however, contend that God is the consummate ‘responder,’ who “*works all things together for good*” but virtue of His wisdom and power. This is special pleading, for the entry of Sin into Creation apart from the Divine Will indicates a weakness in the omniscience and omnipotence of God that cannot be diminished by wishful thinking that He can work it all out in the end.

----- Unit 16b -----

The Syllogism of Theodicy:

If we acknowledge some relationship between the Divine Decree and the advent of evil in Creation, we only move deeper into the forest of thought. For if God “*sovereignly foreordains whatsoever comes to pass*” - and certainly Sin has come to pass - then how is it that the angels and men who thus sin are still held responsible for their actions. As the hypothetical opponent of Paul put it, “*For who can resist His will?*”⁴³⁴ If, on the other hand,

⁴³⁴ Romans 9:19

Man is properly held responsible for his sin, how can acts so repugnant to the nature of a holy God be actually *ordained* by Him? We answer these questions – or perhaps circumnavigate them – by establishing the truths taught by Scripture and experience. With regard to human free agency, it is clearly evident throughout the Scriptures, which testify “*the soul who sins shall die.*”⁴³⁵ Human free agency undoubtedly muddies the water, but it is the undeniable witness of both Scripture and every man’s personal experience. “In man the providential action of God is further complicated by this extent of his reasoning powers, by the freedom of his will, by his self-control over his affections, by his original capacity to do right or wrong, and especially by his fallen condition.”⁴³⁶ What Boyce is saying here is that no Theodicy can proceed along right lines, that does not take man to be a fully responsible, free moral agent in the commission of sin.

But it is objected, that if there were an absolute decree, man could not be free; and so, could not be responsible. But consciousness and God’s word assure us we are free. I reply, the facts cannot be incompatible because Scripture most undoubtedly asserts both, and both together.⁴³⁷

The second foundational truth to this study, is again the clear testimony of both Scripture and conscience: that God is not the author of Sin. James removes the fount of Sin as far from God as possible, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.*”⁴³⁸ And the prophet Habakkuk speaks of God as one *whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil*. Thus to make God the immediate author of sin is an error as morally reprehensible as to remove the advent of evil from the auspices of the Divine will is theologically untenable. It must be that the responsibility for the commission of sin lies with the agent, be he angel or man, and the actuality of sin itself lies within the all-encompassing scope of the Divine Decree. The solution, though we may not be able to formulate it to universal satisfaction, is a matter

⁴³⁵ Ezekiel 18:20

⁴³⁶ Boyce; 223.

⁴³⁷ Dabney; 222-223.

⁴³⁸ James 1:13

of BOTH/AND rather than EITHER/OR. God, in the unfolding of His eternal and omnipotent decree, utilizes the foreordained actions of moral agents – men and angels – to accomplish His purposes, while the agents themselves act in full freedom, according to their will. The fact that God wills and works in and through the actions of free moral agents, does not thereby destroy that freedom; rather it is the case that the inscrutable wisdom of God fulfills the dictates of the Divine Purpose while preserving the freedom, and hence responsibility, of moral agents.

For even though creatures function as means in relation to each other, God using them in the execution of His work and purpose, they are nevertheless the primary cause of their motions and activities...There is no inconsistency in the fact that two causes of a different order have the same result, especially since the result is one and the same, proceeding from both sources in a different manner.⁴³⁹

We come now to the mode, as it were, of Sin's advent into the universe, vis-à-vis the Divine Decree. In other words, *How* did God decree Sin? It is inescapable that the advent of evil is part of the decree that encompasses all things *whatsoever* that come to pass, but in what manner did God decree that evil enter His perfect Creation? Here theologians typically speak of God's *permissive* will or His *permissive* decree, whereby He permitted the fall of the angels and of Man rather than caused these events. Anyone who has considered the teaching of the Divine *permissive will* recognizes the difficulty involved as an answer to the problem. For if knowing that Man would fall given the temptation of the forbidden fruit – and knowing that Man's fall was an integral part of the overall *plan and purpose* for Creation itself – how can it be conceived that 'permission' differs from 'action'? The distinction is necessary to avoid making God the immediate author of Sin, but it can only be made with careful definition of terms.

At this point the French Reformed theologian Francis Turretin offers valuable assistance to our understanding. Turretin distinguishes God's *permission* with regard to Sin as an *active* permission rather than a *passive* one. When we speak of God not

⁴³⁹ à Brakel; 339.

preventing man or angel from exercising the will to sin, we must distinguish between God passively letting matters take their course versus God actively willing not to hinder an event that He had the power to stop. "But it must be conceived positively and affirmatively; not simply that God does not will to hinder sin...but that he wills not to hinder sin. Thus the permission involves a positive act of the secret will by which God designedly and willingly determined not to hinder sin."⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore, Turretin points out that God's permission in regard to sin has to do with the act and not the content of the act: it is a physical permission involving a not-hindering on God's part, rather than a moral permission which would be tantamount to an approval by God of sin.⁴⁴¹ Thus we conclude that God permitted the advent of sin by not hindering free moral agents from committing an act they knew to be repugnant to God, and that God



Theodore Beza (1519-1605)

actively rather than passively willed not to hinder that act, while at no time yielding moral approval to the content of the act itself. Turretin quotes Theodore Beza at this point, "It remains, therefore, that he willingly permits what he permits."⁴⁴² While this may seem like splitting verbal hairs, it is actually a quite important and revealing distinction. In the first place, it delivers us from the ridiculous and blasphemous notion of a passive

God who stands by while His Creation is corrupted by the rebellion first of Satan, then of Adam. Such a conclusion would indicate that God was (1) unable to hinder sin, or (2) oblivious to the progress of actions of His created beings, the first of which impugns the Divine Omnipotence; the second, the Divine Omniscience. The doctrine of the 'active' permissive will of God with regard to the advent of evil, is an affirmation that God could have prevented sin had He chosen to intervene, to hinder both angel and man from

⁴⁴⁰ Turretin; 516.

⁴⁴¹ *Idem.*

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*; 517.

exercising free agency in the direction of rebellion. Shedd writes, “The power to prevent sin is implied in its permission. No one can be said to permit what he cannot prevent.”⁴⁴³

Second, it re-emphasizes the Divine Will as the fount of all that has come to pass, while removing God from being the cause of that which is evil. “[Sin’s] presence proceeds from no necessity of his nature, nor from any antagonistic power which he could not resist.”⁴⁴⁴ Third, by clearly and safely associating the advent of Sin with the Decree of God, we are assured that the purpose of Sin cannot be other than *good* and the *glory of God* in the fullness of His perfections. “For since his will can have for its object nothing but good, it cannot will evil as evil, but as terminated on the permission of that which is good.”⁴⁴⁵ Turretin concludes this section of his discussion with sage words.

Scripture says nothing expressly as to the reason why he permitted angels or men to fall. However, because nothing takes place without his knowledge or against his will, it ought not to be doubted that it happened by a certain and deliberate counsel (which is safer to admire than to pry into).⁴⁴⁶

Permission - Guidance - Consummation

Reformed Theology asserts that sin cannot be brought out from under the Divine Providence without doing great damage to the doctrine of God, and introducing instability in the moral progress of the created universe. While refraining from making God the author of sin, we must at the same time acknowledge both His sovereignty over its advent, and its purposeful incorporation into the Divine Plan. This antinomy is perfectly represented in Peter’s words to the Jews,

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know – Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death. (Acts 2:22-23)

⁴⁴³ Shedd; 420.

⁴⁴⁴ Boyce; 226.

⁴⁴⁵ Turretin; 517.

⁴⁴⁶ *Idem*.

The theme is carried over into Peter's prayer in Acts 4,

For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. (Acts 4:27-28)

Reformed Theology refuses to dispense with the coordinate realities of the responsible actions of Man and the Sovereign inexorable purpose of God, simply because their coordination is not easy to comprehend. All that happens is attributed to the Divine Will and Decree, answering only to the Divine Purpose and executed in a manner that is fitting to the Divine Nature. Even Sin. "But yet sin ought not to be removed from the providence of God, for it falls under it in many ways as to its beginning, progress, and end. As to its beginning, he freely permits it; as to its progress, he wisely directs it; as to its end, he powerfully terminates and brings it to a good end."⁴⁴⁷

The majesty of the Divine Wisdom and Power lies not in God being the superlative 'responder' to the unforeseen and unpreventable actions of rational creatures, but rather in using these foreseen acts as means and instruments toward the absolute fulfillment of His eternal plan and purpose. "These innumerable spirits good and evil, fall under the Providence of God in a twofold manner. They are the object of it, and they are the agents of it."⁴⁴⁸ Hence the advent of evil is in accordance with the Divine Decree; its progress and spread in accordance with the Divine Purpose, and the consummation of its overthrow and end, in accordance with the Divine Glory. Through it all He remains Sovereign and Holy, unsurprised by the actions of rational free agents, and unsullied by their sin.

⁴⁴⁷ Turretin; 516.

⁴⁴⁸ Breckinridge; 362.

The Problem of Predestination:

One of the most significant features of the permission, guidance, and consummation of Sin within the Divine Decree, is the selection of an 'elect people' from among the mass of fallen humanity, purposing for the elect Salvation and Eternal Glory with God. The concept of **election** is unavoidable in Scripture, as it is typified in God's choosing of Israel from among the nations in the Old Testament, and is specifically addressed to believers in the New Testament. Hence, within evangelicalism, there is no debate as to the use of the term, only vehement disagreement as to its meaning and scope. The Reformed view is, of course, ably summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith.

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.⁴⁴⁹

Theologians argue as to the order of the decree(s) with regard to the Divine permission of sin and the Divine election of those who would be saved. Within evangelicalism, the camps divide between the *supralapsarian*, who put the decree to elect prior in logical order to the decree to permit sin, and the *sublapsarian*, who reverse this order. The argument is both impossible of solution and rather unfruitful in its pursuit, so we will leave it to the further investigation of the student if desired. What is pertinent to the current analysis, however, is the recognition that the two 'events' - the permission of sin and the election of the saved - are both facets of the Divine Providence, and are related. One is permissive, though actively so, while the other is entirely active, and monergistically so. In other words, God merely had to will not to hinder rational angels

⁴⁴⁹ http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/

and men in order for the advent of sin to take place, but the recovery of that fallen state requires the fullest intervention of God. “The certainty of sin by a *permissive* decree, is an insoluble mystery for the finite mind. The certainty of holiness in the elect by an *efficacious* decree, is easily explicable...God is the efficient author of holiness, but not of sin.”⁴⁵⁰ Elsewhere Shedd writes, “Sin is the solitary action of the will unassisted by grace; but holiness is the action of the will wrought upon by God.”⁴⁵¹

Acknowledging the concept of Election or Predestination has thus far not united evangelicals in the meaning thereof. There are four basic categories of thought within historical Christian Theology concerning the scope of election, or the object of the electing decree. These are,

1. The Election of those whom God Foresaw from eternity would believe. This is the Arminian view and perhaps the prevalent conception within modern evangelicalism, at least in the United States.
2. The Election of the Mode of Salvation, namely, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This view is propounded by the staunchest defenders of human libertarian free will, as the means of salvation having been made available by God, cannot be effectuated apart from the free will decision of the sinner. This view is propounded by a segment of classical Arminianism and by Socinianism/Open Theism.
3. The Election of Certain People to Purpose and Events. For instance, the choice of Pharaoh in the days of Moses, and of Herod and Pontius Pilate in the days of Christ. This view is refuted by application of the earlier discussion regarding the necessity of Providence *in specific* in order to achieve Providence *in general*.
4. The Election of Individual Sinners unto Salvation. The Reformed view.

As to the first view, that of the majority of classical Arminianism, the controversy is the most serious that exists between that school of thought and Reformed Theology. The typical refutation of the Arminian view, by Calvinists, will focus a great deal of attention on the total depravity of man in his fallen state. In other words, the inability of any sinner to actually believe apart from the regenerative work of God the Holy Spirit. Thus it would be impossible for God to foresee in time what cannot happen apart from

⁴⁵⁰ Shedd; 420.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*; 368.

His powerful and effective intervention. Furthermore, and more in line with our current study in Divine Providence, that God might foresee the believing of any man in time must of necessity be *infallible* foresight, which renders the outcome as determined in time as if God had foreordained it from eternity past. The predestinarian maintains that the certainty of all events has a relation to the Divine omnipotence, as well as to the Divine omniscience. God not only knows all events, but he decrees them.”⁴⁵²

The focus of this particular lesson, however, is upon the doctrine of Election or Predestination as it pertains to the salvation of a set number of sinners from the mass of fallen humanity. Thus we conclude that the act of Election must comprise the same attributes as the overall, and single, Divine Decree. This means that it must be comprehensive and exhaustive, as well as complete and final from its origin thought, if we may put it that way. Simply stated, the Divine Decree admits of no contingency in any of its parts, including that of Election unto salvation. With regard to the Arminian view of foreseen faith, this analysis of the Decree demands that the initiating force in the believing of any sinner be the eternal purpose and energy of God, rather than the temporal faith of man. “It was the personal foreordination to eternal life which determined the believing, and not the foreseen believing which conditioned the foreordination.”⁴⁵³ Shedd adds, “The decree of election is unconditional. It depends upon the sovereign pleasure of God, not upon the foreseen faith or works of the individual.”⁴⁵⁴

The same line of argumentation holds against the other two views – the election of the mode of salvation being faith, and the election of certain circumstances and persons for particular calling. It must, however, be admitted that both of these are indeed aspects of the Divine Decree. The error made by theologians who espouse these views, is in confusing a part for the whole. God did raise up Pharaoh, and sovereignly ordained the timing of the governmental administrations of Herod and Pontius Pilate to coincide with

⁴⁵² Shedd; 403.

⁴⁵³ Hodge, A. A.; 127.

⁴⁵⁴ Shedd; 428.

the trial of His Son. And without doubt God ordained that salvation was to be at all times through faith in the promised, and then provided, Messiah Jesus. But these forms of Providence hardly exhaust the biblical language of election, which pertains to individuals as much as to nations.

That faith on the part of the sinner is prerequisite to salvation does not annul the effectiveness of the Divine Decree, for God has decreed from eternity the *means* as well as the *ends* of that which He purposes. "The Divine decree may require means or conditions in order to its execution, but these means or conditions are included in the decree." This facet of the decree – that it encompasses both the means and the ends – flows from the nature of the Decree discussed earlier, which in turn flows from the nature of God as Infinite and Simple, not composed of parts nor subject to contingency. "But if faith depends upon the undecreed action of the sinner's will, the Divine predestination to faith is dependent for success upon the sinner's uncertain action, and is conditioned by it. The means to the decreed end, in this case, are left outside of the decree."⁴⁵⁵

The controversy surrounding the Calvinistic, and Pauline, doctrine of Predestination often comes to a head when the concept of *reprobation* is broached. Legions of straw men are erected in opposition to the Reformed view, relative to the decree of God in reference to those who are not of the elect. One common complaint is that sovereign individual election, meaning as it does that those who are not of the elect are outside the possibility of salvation, implies that God created millions of human beings simply to destroy them. While it must be admitted that some such interpretation could be placed on Paul's words in Romans 9:22-23, it must be remembered that God no more created men simply to destroy them, than He created men simply to save them. All that God has done, He has done to the glory of His Name; subordinate purposes are frequently shrouded in mystery to our finite minds.

Another complaint is that the Reformed interpretation of predestination has God 'dragging sinners kicking and screaming into heaven.' Every straw man worth its salt

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; 405.

will have a modicum of truth, and this one does as well. The common rejoinder admits that man, in his fallen state, is 'kicking and screaming.' In other words, Reformed words, he is totally depraved and does not seek after God in any way. He is not able to, yes; but he is also not *willing* to. But God does not drag any man into heaven, rather He "*makes them willing in the day of His power.*"⁴⁵⁶

Finally, it is argued that God's election of a particular and specific few is arbitrary and unfair. To answer this, we say that it cannot be arbitrary because it is from God. Though we cannot possibly fathom the reason why He chose one and not another, that ignorance cannot be morphed into a charge of caprice upon God. He who works all things according to the counsel of His will knows infallibly why He has chosen some and not others, and His reasons are pure and good; of this we can be assured. As to the charge of unfairness, this too cannot hold, for it cannot be charged as unfair when not one of the recipients of a gift is in the least manner deserving of it. This is the meaning of the parable of the vineyard workers, and of the vineyard owner's final retort to the grumblers, "*Am I not free to do what I will with what is My own?*" Shedd writes, "But it is impossible for God to show partiality in the bestowment of salvation from sin, because the sinner has no right or claim to it."⁴⁵⁷ Rather we ought to praise God that He has not dealt with us *fairly*, but with grace and mercy; not returning to us as we deserve, but rather as His inscrutable mercy and grace decree.

Yet the fact remains that the Election of some unto eternal life leaves the rest of mankind still in sin and under the just condemnation of God. This reality is called 'Reprobation,' and many arguments have been waged with regard to the nature of God's active involvement, or decree, relative to Reprobation. Taking the nature of the decree back to the attributes of God, which we have done consistently in this study, we see that the two effects - Election unto salvation and Reprobation unto condemnation - do not flow from the same attribute (caveat: this is speaking entirely in human terms, in accordance with the biblical representation, while at the same time recognizing the unity

⁴⁵⁶ Psalm 110:3

⁴⁵⁷ Shedd; 425.

and simplicity of God's Being). Robert Louis Dabney comments, "God's election is everywhere represented in Scripture as an act of mercy, and His preterition (i.e., reprobation) as an act of righteous anger against sin."⁴⁵⁸

The aspect of the Divine Decree that pertains to Reprobation is analogous to the decree to permit sin in the first place. It is *permissive*, though willing on the part of God, rather than *efficacious*, as God's action must be in regeneration. "It is a permissive not an efficient act on the part of God, that is asserted in preterition. In respect to regeneration, God decides to do nothing, in the case of a non-elect sinner."⁴⁵⁹ It becomes clear to us that the judgment of the unrighteous will manifest the perfection of the Divine Holiness, while the election of a people called out of the mass of fallen humanity entirely by grace, manifests the unfathomable mercy and goodness of God. John Calvin was correct in calling Predestination – both to Election and Reprobation – a *doctrine terrible* – an awesome and fearsome teaching. Upon this doctrine rests the true security of every believer, and the ultimate and just calamity of every unbeliever who persists in unbelief. "I would rather say that it [i.e., reprobation] consists simply of a sovereign, yet righteous purpose to leave out the non-elect, which preterition was foreseen and intended to result in their final righteous condemnation."⁴⁶⁰ Or as the inspired author of Hebrews puts it: "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*"⁴⁶¹

Soli Deo Gloria

⁴⁵⁸ Dabney; 240.

⁴⁵⁹ Shedd; 444.

⁴⁶⁰ Dabney; 239.

⁴⁶¹ Hebrews 10:31