

What I am going to talk about today is the unity of God.

First, I am convinced that there is an urgent need in the church today for a much greater understanding of Christian doctrine, or theology. Not only pastors and teachers need to understand theology in greater depth, the whole church does as well. One day by God's grace we may have churches full of Christians who can discuss, apply, and live the doctrinal teachings of the Bible as readily as they can discuss the details of their own jobs, or hobbies, or the fortunes of their favorite sports team or television programs. It is not that Christians lack the ability to understand doctrine; it is just that they must have access to it in an understandable form. To that end, the lost art of transcripts is available for this message, so that we might study to show ourselves approved. The other forms of the Word of God, other than the written word, are not suitable as the primary basis for the study of theology. Once access to doctrine is made available in an understandable form by way of transcripts, I think that many Christians will find that understanding and living the doctrines of Scripture, is one of their greatest joys.

Again, this message is the unity of God. The unity of God may be defined as follows: God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times. This attribute of God has also been called God's simplicity, using simple in the less common sense of "not complex" or "not composed of parts." But since the word simple today has the more common sense of "easy to understand" and "unintelligent, or even foolish," it is more helpful now to speak of God's "unity" rather than his "simplicity."

When Scripture speaks about God's attributes it never singles out one attribute of God as more important than all the rest. There is an assumption that every attribute is completely true of God and is true of all of God's character. For example, 1st John 1 5, says that "God is light", and then a little later in 1st John 4 8, it says also that "God is love". There is no suggestion that part of God is light and part of God is love, or that God is partly light and partly love. Nor should we think that God is more light than love or more love than light. Rather it is God himself who is light, and it is God himself who is also love.

The same is true of other descriptions of God's character, such as that in Exodus 34 6 to 7: The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the 4th generation."

We would not want to say that these attributes are only characteristic of some part of God, but rather that they are characteristic of God himself, and therefore characteristic of all of God. These considerations indicate that we should not think of God as some kind of collection of various attributes added together. Nor, should we think of the attributes of God as something external from God's real being or real self, something added on to who God really is.

Rather, we must remember that God's whole being includes all of his attributes: he is entirely loving, entirely merciful, entirely just, and so forth. Every attribute of God that we find in Scripture is true of all of God's being, and we therefore can say that every attribute of God also

qualifies every other attribute. It should be clear that each attribute is simply a way of describing one aspect of God's total character or being.

God himself is a unity, a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in all of these attributes.

Why then does Scripture speak of these different attributes of God? It is probably because we are unable to grasp all of God's character at one time, and we need to learn of it from different perspectives over a period of time. Yet, these perspectives should never be set in opposition to one another, for they are just different ways of looking at the totality of God's character.

In terms of practical application, this means that we should never think, for example, that God is a loving God at one point in history and a just or wrathful God at another point in history. He is the same God always, and everything he says or does is fully consistent with all his attributes. It is not accurate to say, as some have said, that God is a God of justice in the Old Testament and a God of love in the New Testament. God is and always has been infinitely just and infinitely loving as well, and everything he does in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is completely consistent with both of those attributes.

Now it is true that some actions of God show certain of his attributes more prominently. Creation demonstrates his power and wisdom, the atonement demonstrates his love and justice, and the radiance of heaven demonstrates his glory and beauty. Yet, all of these in some way or other also demonstrate his knowledge, and holiness, and mercy, and truthfulness, and patience, and sovereignty, and so forth. It would be difficult indeed to find some attribute of God that is not reflected at least to some degree in any one of his acts of redemption. This is due to the fact mentioned above: God is a unity and everything he does is an act of the whole person of God.

Moreover, the doctrine of the unity of God should caution us against attempting to single out any one attribute of God as more important than all the others. At various times people have attempted to see God's holiness, or his love, or his self-existence, or his righteousness, or some other attribute as the most important attribute of his being. But all such attempts seem to misconceive of God as a combination of various parts, with some parts being somehow larger or more influential than others. Furthermore, it is hard to understand exactly what "most important" might mean. Does it mean that there are some actions of God that are not fully consistent with some of his other attributes? That there are some attributes that God somehow sets aside at times in order to act in ways slightly contrary to those attributes? Certainly we cannot maintain either of these views, for that would mean that God is inconsistent with his own character, or that he changes and becomes something different from what he was previously. Rather, when we see all the attributes as merely various aspects of the total character of God, then such a question becomes quite unnecessary and we discover that there is no attribute that can be singled out as more important. It is God himself in his whole being who is supremely important, and it is God himself in his whole being whom we are to seek to know and to love.

Why was the church so concerned about the unity of the Trinity? Is it really essential to hold to the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit? Yes it is, for this teaching has implications for the very heart of the Christian faith. First, the atonement is at stake. If Jesus is merely a created

being, and not fully God, then it is hard to see how he, a creature, could bear the full wrath of God against all of our sins. Could any creature, no matter how great, really save us?

Second, justification by faith alone is threatened if we deny the full deity of the Son. This is seen today in the teaching of those who do not believe in justification by faith alone. If Jesus is not fully God, we would rightly doubt whether we can really trust him to save us completely. Could we really depend on any creature fully for our salvation?

Third, if Jesus is not an infinite God, should we pray to him or worship him? Who but an infinite, omniscient God could hear and respond to all the prayers of all God's people? And who but God himself is worthy of worship? Indeed, if Jesus is merely a creature, no matter how great, it would be idolatry to worship him, yet the New Testament commands us to do so in Philippians 2 9 to 11 and in Revelation 5 12 to 14.

Philippians 2 9 to 11 says:

- Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:
- That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;
- And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Furthermore, Revelation 5 12 to 14 tells us.

- Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.
- And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.
- And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.

Every knee of man, angels, and demons will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord. Those who have denied His existence will bow in worship. Those who have spent their lives rebelling at His authority will finally bow in submission. Every being from all ages will ultimately bow and worship Jesus.

If we bow our knees to His Lordship now, we will enjoy wonderful lives here, and an eternity in His blessings hereafter. Those who deny His rightful claim to the Lordship of their lives will suffer for it in this life as well as the next, and will still have to bow their knees to His authority anyway. There is nothing to gain and everything to lose if people refuse to make Jesus their Lord.

Furthermore, in John 20 28 to 29, Thomas without controversy worshiped Jesus as his God.  
John 20 28 to 29.

- And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.
- Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for worshiping him as his God. Quite the contrary Jesus blessed Thomas, for believing that Jesus was his God. The first and most important commandment is, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. There was no God created before me, along side me, neither will there be any created after me. So God is emphatically claiming to us now. There is but one God, and he is that one God.

Furthermore, Jesus said a greater blessing would be given to us for behaving the same way that Thomas behaved, because we did not see what Thomas saw. Our belief would be by faith.

Fourth, if someone teaches that Christ was a created being but nonetheless one who saved us, then this teaching wrongly begins to attribute credit for salvation to a creature and not to God himself. But this wrongfully exalts the creature rather than the Creator, something Scripture never allows us to do.

Fifth, the independence and personal nature of God are at stake: If there is no Trinity, then there were no interpersonal relationships within the being of God before creation. Thus, without personal relationships, it is difficult to see how God could be genuinely personal, or be without the need for a creation to relate to.

Sixth, the unity of the universe is at stake: If there is not perfect plurality and perfect unity in God himself, then we have no basis for thinking there can be any ultimate unity among the diverse elements of the universe either. Clearly, in the doctrine of the Trinity, the heart of the Christian faith is at stake. Herman Bavinck says that “Athanasius understood better than any of his contemporaries that Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity. He adds, “In the confession of the Trinity, throbs the heart of the Christian religion: every error results from, or upon deeper reflection may be traced to, a wrong view of this doctrine.

Tritheism, Denies That There Is Only One God. A final possible way to attempt an easy reconciliation of the biblical teaching about the Trinity, would be to deny that there is only one God. The result is to say that God is three persons, and each person is fully God. Therefore, there are three Gods. Technically this view would be called “tritheism.”

Few persons have held this view in the history of the church. It has similarities to many ancient pagan religions that held to a multiplicity of gods. This view would result in confusion in the minds of believers. There would be no absolute worship, or loyalty, or devotion, to one true God. We would wonder to which God we should give our ultimate allegiance. And, at a deeper level, this view would destroy any sense of ultimate unity in the universe: even in the very being of God, there would be plurality, but no unity.

Although no modern groups advocate tritheism, perhaps many evangelicals today unintentionally tend toward tritheistic views of the Trinity. Perhaps, they fail to recognize the distinct personhood of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but seldom being aware of the unity of God, as one undivided being.

### What Are the Distinctions Between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

After completing this survey of errors concerning the Trinity, we may now go on to ask if anything more can be said about the distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we say that each member of the Trinity is fully God, and that each person fully shares in all the attributes of God, then is there any difference at all among the persons? We cannot say, for example, that the Father is more powerful or wiser than the Son, or that the Father and Son are wiser than the Holy Spirit, or that the Father existed before the Son and Holy Spirit existed, for to say anything like that would be to deny the full deity of all three members of the Trinity. But what then are the distinctions between the persons?

The Persons of the Trinity Have Different Primary Functions in Relating to the World. When Scripture discusses the way in which God relates to the world, both in creation and in redemption, the persons of the Trinity are said to have different functions or primary activities. Sometimes, this has been called the “economy of the Trinity”. Using economy in an old sense, meaning “ordering of activities.” In this sense, people used to speak of the “economy of a household”, or “home economics”. Meaning not just the financial affairs of a household, but all of the “ordering of activities” within the household. The “economy of the Trinity” means the different ways the three persons act as they relate to the world, and to each other.

We see these different functions in the work of creation. God the Father spoke the creative words to bring the universe into being. Yet, it was God the Son, the eternal Word of God, who carried out these creative decrees. In John 1 3, “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made”. Moreover, Colossians 1 16 says, “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities, all things were created through him and for him”. In Genesis 1 2, The Holy Spirit was active as well in a different way. It was “moving”, or “hovering” over the face of the waters, apparently sustaining and manifesting God’s immediate presence in his creation.

In the work of redemption, there are also distinct functions representing unity. In John 3 16, God the Father planned redemption and sent his Son into the world. The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us. God the Father did not come and die for our sins, nor did God the Holy Spirit. That was the particular work of the Son. Then, after Jesus ascended back into heaven, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to apply redemption to us. Jesus speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name”. He also says, that he himself will send the Holy Spirit. For he says in John 16 7, “If I go, I will send him to you”. Jesus speaks of a time, “when the Counselor comes in John 15 26, Whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth”. John 3 5 to 8 says, It is especially the role of the Holy Spirit to give us regeneration or new spiritual life, to sanctify us, and to empower us for service. In general, the work of the Holy Spirit seems to be to bring to completion the work that has been planned by God the Father, and begun by God the Son.

So, we may say that the role of the Father in creation and redemption, has been to plan and direct and send the Son and Holy Spirit. This is not surprising, for it shows that the Father and the Son relate to one another, as a father and son relate to one another in a human family. The father

directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directions of the father. The Holy Spirit is obedient to the directives of both the Father and the Son.

Thus, while the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation. The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles. Yet, all three are in unity.

The Persons of the Trinity Eternally Existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But why do the persons of the Trinity take these different roles in relating to creation? Was it accidental or arbitrary? Could God the Father have come instead of God the Son to die for our sins? Could the Holy Spirit have sent God the Father to die for our sins, and then sent God the Son to apply redemption to us?

No, it does not seem that these things could have happened. For, the role of commanding, directing, and sending, is appropriate to the position of the Father, after whom all human fatherhood is patterned. The role of obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us is appropriate to the role of the Son, who is also called the Word of God.

Sometimes the Bible refers to the Son of God as “the Word of God.” Thus, sometimes the Word of God is a person. In Revelation 19:13, John sees the risen Lord Jesus in heaven and says, “The name by which he is called is The Word of God.” Similarly, in the beginning of John’s gospel, in John 1:1 we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. It is clear that John is speaking of the Son of God here, because in verse 14 he says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” These two verses, and John 1:1, are the only instances where the Bible refers to God the Son as “the Word”, or “the Word of God”. So, this usage is not common. Yet, it does indicate that among the members of the Trinity, it is especially God the Son, who in his person as well as in his words, has the role of communicating the character of God to us, and of expressing the will of God for us.

These roles could not have been reversed, or the Father would have ceased to be the Father, and the Son would have ceased to be the Son. By analogy from that relationship, we may conclude that, the role of the Holy Spirit, is similarly one that was appropriate to the relationship he had with the Father and the Son, before the world was created.

Second, before the Son came to earth, and even before the world was created, for all eternity the Father has been the Father. The Son has been the Son. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit. These relationships were eternal. They were something that occurred in eternity, before time was. We may conclude this first from the unchangeableness of God: if God now exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then he has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We may also conclude that the relationships were eternal, from other verses in Scripture that speak of the relationships the members of the Trinity had to one another, before the creation of the world. For instance, when Scripture speaks of God’s work of election before the creation of the world, it speaks of the Father choosing us “in” the Son: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . In Ephesians 1:3 to 4, he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him”. The initial act of choosing is attributed

to God the Father, who regards us as united to Christ or “in Christ”, before we ever existed. Similarly, of God the Father, it is said in Romans 8:29, that “those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”. We also read of the “foreknowledge of God the Father”, in distinction from particular functions of the other two members of the Trinity. Even the fact that the Father “gave his only Son”, in John 3:16, and “sent the Son into the world” in John 3:17, indicate that there was a Father-Son relationship before Christ came into the world. The Son did not become the Son when the Father sent him into the world. Rather, the great love of God is shown in the fact that the one who was always Father, gave the one who was always his only Son: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” in John 3:16. “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son” in Galatians 4:4.

When Scripture speaks of creation, once again it speaks of the Father creating through the Son, indicating a relationship prior to when creation began in John 1:3. These passages again imply that, there was a relationship of Father, as originator, and Son, as active agent, before creation. It implies that, this relationship, made it appropriate, for the different persons of the Trinity, to fulfill the roles they actually did fulfill.

Therefore, the different functions that we see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit performing are simply, outworkings of an eternal relationship between the three persons. This is a relationship that has always existed and will exist for eternity. God has always existed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These distinctions are essential to the very nature of God himself, and they could not be otherwise.

Finally, it may be said that there are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God. The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other, and to the creation. In those relationships they carry out roles that are appropriate to each person.

How is Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit one? They are one in essence. This necessitates, the need to talk about, time, and the difference between, an essence (plural noun), a person (singular noun), and a being (plural noun).

First of all, time. Sometimes, we say that God exist outside of time. Yes! Yet, God revealed to me that eternity is the absence of time. In eternity time did not exist. Where there is no matter, there is no time. The bible says that God created all things. Einstein said,  $E = MC^2$ . Thus God created time by creating matter. Before that, time did not exist, because matter did not exist. Speed, can only exist, if matter exists. Speed, is the speed of matter within the confines of a universe. Speed is the speed of light. The big bang theory says, that there was an infusion of matter, into this universe. The black hole, represents, a different universe, with different laws of physics. Maybe laws of quantum physics, which is theoretical at best.

This tells us that, in a universe without matter or time, everything happens at one time. Thus, there is no concept of sequential order. Jesus came out of eternity, before time was. Thus he always was. There was no time when God existed, and Jesus did not exist.

The essence, is what makes something what it is. This implies that the something is something unique. For example, a dog, a radio, a planet, a number, and etc.. Yet, unlike essence, substance is not necessarily about kinds of things. Since what is durable, separable, and identifiable may be an individual. Where as such, what it is is irrelevant... Each of these, is something unique. Thus, Aristotle distinguished "primary substances," for example individuals, from "secondary substances," for example a kind. A kind of thing is then to be associated with an essence. An essence can always specify more than one individual or more than one person.

Here we see that, an essence, is a kind of thing, such as a man or a God, are kinds of things. On the other hand, a substance is not necessarily about kinds of things. Rather a substance has more to do with an individual, or a sub-category of the kind of thing. Such as a poodle is a sub-category of a dog, or a person is a sub-category of a man. Just as all dogs are of the same essence, all men are of the same essence.

All sub-categories of poodles are not the same. Some are Standard Poodles, Miniature Poodles, and even Toy Poodles. Likewise, all sub-categories of persons are not the same. Some are referred to as individuals. Which happens to be a singular noun of a person. While, others are referred to, in law, as the 1st person and the 2nd person. Which happens to be a plural noun of a person. Now a sub-category of a person, the 1st person, is an individual, or a substance.

Now here is the heart of the issue. One God in three persons. A man is an essence. A man begets a man. A God is an essence. Gods beget Gods. Gods are a kind of a thing.

Jesus was God's only begotten Son. That is, he came out of God's loins. The bible says, in John 1 18, that Jesus was hidden in God. Jesus was begotten by nature, in the same way that Cain and Able, were begotten of Adam and Eve. God does not create anything anymore. He has put laws of nature into effect, in eternity before time. Laws of Nature reproduce what God has already created. Again, Jesus was not created. He was begotten, before time itself existed. Micah 5 2 says that, Jesus was from everlasting. That is, Jesus existed, before time itself existed. Thus, he always was. He came out of the loins of God instantly. There was no time when God existed, and Jesus did not exist.

Likewise, the laws of nature, that God put in effect in eternity say, that everything in nature reproduces after its own kind. Genesis 1 11 tells us, that God said, everything whose seed is in itself, brings forth fruit after its own kind. Matthew 7 18 goes on to say, a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit. Neither can a corrupt tree, bring forth good fruit. Finally, James 3 12 goes on to say, the fig tree cannot bear olive berries. Thus, we can conclude that, from the beginning of time until now, everything in nature reproduces after its own kind. Thus, a man cannot have a son, who is literally a dog.

Likewise, God is a kind of thing. God himself would reproduce after his own kind. So, the question is does God reproduce. If so, we would have to conclude that, the kind of thing that God would reproduce, would be the same kind of thing that God himself is.

The bible says, that God had a son. All of us are sons and daughters of God. Yet, we and angels are adopted sons of God. On the other hand, Jesus is God's only begotten son. Begotten, implies



reproduction. Jesus came out of God's Loins instantaneously before time was. Jesus was God's son by nature, not by adoption.

Nature reveals this to us in Romans 1 20. It says.

"For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse".

If Jesus is God's son, and he is. Therefore, nature reveals that the essence of the father is always in the son. Because the essence of God is, that he is a God and he is infinite. Then it is unthinkable that God could have a son, that has a different essence than his own. It is unthinkable that, an infinite God could have a son, not a God and has a finite essence. That is like saying that a man could have a son, who has a literal essence of a dog. That is the heart of calling Jesus God's son. If a person cannot look at nature, and see that this is true, then you are without excuse. If you believe that, an infinite God, could have son that is not a God with a finite son, then you are without excuse.

Likewise, Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. What? The Holy Ghost? She was found with child of the Holy Ghost? I thought the father was the father of Jesus. Yet it says right here that she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Now if the Holy Ghost and the father are the same God, and there is only one God, then this is not a problem. If there are three separate persons, then the father was not the father. We have a real mass confusion here. Therefore, the Holy Ghost is also God.

This is why the idea of, eternal equality in being, but subordination in role, has been essential to the church's doctrine of the Trinity since it was first affirmed in the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed said, that the Son was "begotten of the Father before all ages", and that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." Surprisingly, some recent evangelical writings have denied an eternal subordination in role among the members of the Trinity, but it has clearly been part of the church's doctrine of the Trinity, in Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox expressions, at least since Nicea (A.D. 325). So Charles Hodge says:

The Nicene doctrine includes, the principle of the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. But this subordination does not imply inferiority.... The subordination intended is only that which concerns the mode of subsistence and operation....

The creeds are nothing more than a well-ordered arrangement of the facts of Scripture which concern the doctrine of the Trinity. They assert the distinct personality of the Father, Son, and Spirit . . . and their consequent perfect equality; and the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, as to the mode of subsistence and operation. These are scriptural facts, to which the creeds in question add nothing; and it is in this sense they have been accepted by the Church universal.

Similarly, A. H. Strong says:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while equal in essence and dignity, stand to each other in an order of personality, office, and operation....

The subordination of the person of the Son to the person of the Father, or in other words an order of personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority.... We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence.

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What Is the Relationship Between the Three Persons and the Being of God? After the preceding discussion, the question that remains unresolved is, What is the difference between “person” and “being” in this discussion? How can we say that God is one undivided being, yet that in this one being there are three persons?

First, it is important to affirm that each person is completely and fully God; that is, that each person has the whole fullness of God’s being in himself. The Son is not partly God or just one-third of God, but the Son is wholly and fully God, and so is the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus, it would not be right to think of the Trinity with each person representing only one-third of God’s being.

Rather, we must say that the person of the Father possesses the whole being of God in himself. Similarly, the Son possesses the whole being of God in himself, and the Holy Spirit possesses the whole being of God in himself. When we speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together we are not speaking of any greater being than when we speak of the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone. The Father is all of God’s being. The Son also is all of God’s being. Finally, the Holy Spirit is all of God’s being.

**GOD’S BEING IS NOT DIVIDED INTO THREE EQUAL PARTS BELONGING TO THE THREE MEMBERS OF THE TRINITY.**

This is what the Athanasian Creed affirmed in the following sentences:

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance or Essence. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit.... For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity: to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord: So are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion: to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords.

But if each person is fully God and has all of God’s being, then we also should not think that the personal distinctions are any kind of additional attributes added on to the being of God.

THE PERSONAL DISTINCTIONS IN THE TRINITY ARE NOT SOMETHING ADDED ONTO GOD'S REAL BEING.

Rather, each person of the Trinity has all of the attributes of God, and no one person has any attributes that are not possessed by the others.

On the other hand, we must say that the persons are real, that they are not just different ways of looking at the one being of God. (This would be modalism or Sabellianism.)

Rather, we need to think of the Trinity in such a way that the reality of the three persons is maintained, and each person is seen as relating to the others as an "I" (a first person) and a "you" (a second person) and a "he" (a third person).

The only way it seems possible to do this is to say that the distinction between the persons is not a difference in "being" but a difference in "relationships." This is something far removed from our human experience, where every different human "person" is a different being as well. Somehow God's being is so much greater than ours that within his one undivided being there can be an unfolding into interpersonal relationships, so that there can be three distinct persons.

THE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY ARE NOT JUST THREE DIFFERENT WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE ONE BEING OF GOD.

What then are the differences between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? There is no difference in attributes at all. The only difference between them is the way they relate to each other and to the creation. The unique quality of the Father is the way he relates as Father to the Son and Holy Spirit. The unique quality of the Son is the way he relates as Son. And the unique quality of the Holy Spirit is the way he relates as Spirit.

THERE ARE THREE DISTINCT PERSONS, AND THE BEING OF EACH PERSON IS EQUAL TO THE WHOLE BEING OF GOD.

Our own human personalities provide another faint analogy that can provide some help in thinking about the Trinity. A man can think about different objects outside of himself, and when he does this he is the subject who does the thinking. He can also think about himself, and then he is the object who is being thought about: then he is both subject and object. Moreover, he can reflect on his ideas about himself as a third thing, neither subject nor object, but thoughts that he as a subject has about himself as an object. When this happens, the subject, object, and thoughts are three distinct things. Yet each thing in a way includes his whole being: All of the man is the subject, and all of the man is the object, and the thoughts (though in a lesser sense) are thoughts about all of himself as a person.

But if the unfolding of human personality allows this kind of complexity, then the unfolding of God's personality must allow for far greater complexity than this. Within the one being of God the "unfolding" of personality must allow for the existence of three distinct persons, while each person still has the whole of God's being in himself. The difference in persons must be one of relationship, not one of being, and yet each person must really exist. This tri-personal form of

being is far beyond our ability to comprehend. It is a kind of existence far different from anything we have experienced, and far different from anything else in the universe.

Because the existence of three persons in one God is something beyond our understanding, Christian theology has come to use the word person to speak of these differences in relationship, not because we fully understand what is meant by the word person when referring to the Trinity, but rather so that we might say something instead of saying nothing at all.

Can We Understand the Doctrine of the Trinity? We should be warned by the errors that have been made in the past. They have all come about through attempts to simplify the doctrine of the Trinity and make it completely understandable, removing all mystery from it. This we can never do. However, it is not correct to say that we cannot understand the doctrine of the Trinity at all. Certainly we can understand and know that God is three persons, and that each person is fully God, and that there is one God. We can know these things because the Bible teaches them. Moreover, we can know some things about the way in which the persons relate to each other. But what we cannot understand fully is how to fit together those distinct biblical teachings. We wonder how there can be three distinct persons, and each person have the whole being of God in himself, and yet God is only one undivided being. This we are unable to understand. In fact, it is spiritually healthy for us to acknowledge openly that God's very being is far greater than we can ever comprehend. This humbles us before God and draws us to worship him without reservation.

But it should also be said that Scripture does not ask us to believe in a contradiction. A contradiction would be "There is one God and there is not one God," or "God is three persons and God is not three persons," or even, which is similar to the previous statement, "God is three persons and God is one person, using the word person the same way." For example a person could be a plural noun in law, the 1st person and the 2nd person.

Finally, a contradiction would be, two different things, are in fact the same thing. This is sometimes called a straw-man argument. This is without understanding that an essence is a kind of a thing. Yet, the thing called an essence can always consist of more than one person, or more than one thing. It is what they have in common that makes them a unique kind of thing. Yet, it is their differences that makes them a unity, or a collective.

But to say that "God is three persons and there is one God" is not a contradiction. It is something we do not understand, and it is therefore a mystery or a paradox, but that should not trouble us as long as the different aspects of the mystery are clearly taught by Scripture, for as long as we are finite creatures and not omniscient deity, there will always, for all eternity, be things that we do not fully understand. Louis

Berkhof wisely says:

The Trinity is a mystery . . . man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestation, but unintelligible in its essential nature. . . . The real difficulty lies in the relation in which the persons in the Godhead stand to the divine essence and to one another; and this is a difficulty which the Church cannot remove, but only try to reduce to its proper proportion by a proper definition of terms. It has never tried to explain the

mystery of the Trinity but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off.

Berkhof also says, “It is especially when we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence that all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. It is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead.

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Application,

Because God in himself has both unity and diversity, it is not surprising that unity and diversity are also reflected in the human relationships he has established. We see this first in marriage. When God created man in his own image, he did not create merely isolated individuals, but Scripture tells us, “male and female he created them”, Genesis 1 27. And in the unity of marriage in Genesis 2 24, we see, not a triunity as with God, but at least a remarkable unity of two persons, persons who remain distinct individuals yet also become one in body, mind, and spirit, 1 Corinthians 6 16 – 20; Ephesians 5 31. In fact, in the relationship between man and woman in marriage we see also a picture of the relationship between the Father and Son in the Trinity. Paul says, “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God”, 1 Corinthians 11 3. Here, just as the Father has authority over the Son in the Trinity, so the husband has authority over the wife in marriage. The husband’s role is parallel to that of God the Father and the wife’s role is parallel to that of God the Son. Moreover, just as Father and Son are equal in deity and importance and personhood, so the husband and wife are equal in humanity and importance and personhood. And, although it is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, the gift of children within marriage, coming from both the father and the mother, and subject to the authority of both father and mother, is analogous to the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son in the Trinity.

But the human family is not the only way in which God has ordained that there would be both diversity and unity in the world that reflect something of his own excellence. In the church we have “many members” yet “one body”, 1 Corinthians 12 12. Paul reflects on the great diversity among members of the human body, 1 Corinthians 12 14 – 26, and says that the church is like that: We have many different members in our churches with different gifts and interests, and we depend on and help each other, thereby demonstrating great diversity and great unity at the same time. When we see different people doing many different things in the life of a church we ought to thank God that this allows us to glorify him by reflecting something of the unity and diversity of the Trinity.

We should also notice that God’s purpose in the history of the universe has frequently been to display unity in diversity, and thus to display his glory. We see this not only in the diversity of gifts in the church, 1 Corinthians 12 12 – 26, but also in the unity of Jews and Gentiles, so that all races, diverse as they are, are united in Christ, Ephians 2 16; 3 8 – 10; Revelation 7 9. Paul is amazed that God’s plans for the history of redemption have been like a great symphony so that his wisdom is beyond finding out, Romans 11 33 – 36. Even in the mysterious unity between Christ and the church, in which we are called the bride of Christ, Ephesians 5 31 – 32, we see unity beyond what we ever would have imagined, unity with the Son of God himself. Yet, in all

this we never lose our individual identity but remain distinct persons always able to worship and serve God as unique individuals.

Eventually, the entire universe will partake of this unity of purpose, with every diverse part contributing to the worship of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for one day, at the name of Jesus every knee will bow “in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”, Philippians 2 10 – 11.

On a more everyday level, there are many activities that we carry out as human beings, in the labor force, in social organizations, in musical performances, and in athletic teams, for example, in which many distinct individuals contribute to a unity of purpose or activity. As we see in these activities a reflection of the wisdom of God in allowing us both unity and diversity, we can see a faint reflection of the glory of God in his trinitarian existence. Though we will never fully comprehend the mystery of the Trinity, we can worship God for who he is both in our songs of praise, and in our words and actions as they reflect something of his excellent character.

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## Chapter 12.

Because God’s communicable attributes are to be imitated in our lives, each of these sections will include a short explanation of the way in which the attribute in question is to be imitated by us.

### A. Attributes Describing God’s Being.

1. Spirituality. People have often wondered, what is God made of? Is he made of flesh and blood like ourselves? Certainly not. What then is the material that forms his being? Is God made of matter at all? Or is God pure energy? Or is he in some sense pure thought?

The answer of Scripture is that God is none of these. Rather, we read that “God is spirit” (John 4:24). This statement is spoken by Jesus in the context of a discussion with the woman at the well in Samaria. The discussion is about the location where people should worship God, and Jesus is telling her that true worship of God does not require that one be present either in Jerusalem or in Samaria (John 4:21), for true worship has to do not with physical location but with one’s inner spiritual condition. This is because “God is spirit” and this apparently signifies that God is in no way limited to a spatial location.

Thus, we should not think of God as having size or dimensions, even infinite ones (see the discussion on God’s omnipresence in the previous chapter). We should not think of God’s existence as spirit as meaning that God is infinitely large, for example, for it is not part of God but all of God that is in every point of space (see Ps. 139:7 – 10). Nor should we think that God’s existence as spirit means that God is infinitely small, for no place in the universe can surround

him or contain him (see 1 Kings 8:27). Thus, God's being cannot be rightly thought of in terms of space, however we may understand his existence as "spirit."

We also find that God forbids his people to think of his very being as similar to anything else in the physical creation. We read in the Ten Commandments:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth

generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:4 – 6)

The creation language in this commandment ("heaven above, or . . . earth beneath, or . . . water under the earth") is a reminder that God's being, his essential mode of existence, is different from everything that he has created. To think of his being in terms of anything else in the created universe is to misrepresent him, to limit him, to think of him as less than he really is. To make a graven (or "carved" or "sculptured") image of God as a golden calf, for example, may have been an attempt to portray God as a God who is strong and full of life (like a calf), but to say that God was like a calf was a horribly false statement about God's knowledge, wisdom, love, mercy, omnipresence, eternity, independence, holiness, righteousness, justice, and so forth. Indeed, while we must say that God has made all creation so that each part of it reflects something of his own character, we must also now affirm that to picture God as existing in a form or mode of being that is like anything else in creation is to think of God in a horribly misleading and dishonoring way.

This is why God's jealousy is given as the reason for the prohibition against making images of him: "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God . . ." (Ex. 20:5). God is jealous to protect his own honor. He eagerly seeks for people to think of him as he is and to worship him for all his excellence, and he is angered when his glory is diminished or his character is falsely represented (cf. Deut. 4:23 – 24, where God's intense jealousy for his own honor is again given as the reason for a prohibition against making any images of him).

Thus, God does not have a physical body, nor is he made of any kind of matter like much of the rest of creation. Furthermore, God is not merely energy or thought or some other element of creation. He is also not like vapor or steam or air or space, all of which are created things: God's being is not like any of these. God's being is not even exactly like our own spirits, for these are created things that apparently are able to exist only in one place in one time.

Instead of all these ideas of God, we must say that God is spirit. Whatever this means, it is a kind of existence that is unlike anything else in creation. It is a kind of existence that is far superior to all our material existence. We might say that God is "pure being" or "the fullness or essence of being." Furthermore, this kind of existence is not less real or less desirable than our own existence. Rather, it is more real and more desirable than the material and immaterial existence of

all creation. Before there was any creation, God existed as spirit. His own being is so very real that it was able to cause everything else to come into existence!

At this point we can define God's spirituality: God's spirituality means that God exists as a being that is not made of any matter, has no parts or dimensions, is unable to be perceived by our bodily senses, and is more excellent than any other kind of existence.

We may ask why God's being is this way. Why is God spirit? All that we can say is that this is the greatest, most excellent way to be! This is a form of existence far superior to anything we know. It is amazing to meditate on this fact.

These considerations make us wonder if God's spirituality should perhaps be called an "incommunicable" attribute. To do so would indeed be appropriate in some ways, since God's being is so different from ours. Nevertheless, the fact remains that God has given us spirits in which we worship him (John 4:24; 1 Cor. 14:14; Phil. 3:3), in which we are united with the Lord's spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), with which the Holy Spirit joins to bear witness to our adoption in God's family (Rom. 8:16), and in which we pass into the Lord's presence when we die (Luke 23:46; Eccl. 12:7; Heb. 12:23; cf. Phil. 1:23 – 24). Therefore there is clearly some communication from God to us of a spiritual nature that is something like his own nature, though certainly not in all respects. For this reason it also seems appropriate to think of God's spirituality as a communicable attribute.

2. Invisibility. Related to God's spirituality is the fact that God is invisible. Yet we also must speak of the visible ways in which God manifests himself. God's invisibility can be defined as follows: God's invisibility means that God's total essence, all of his spiritual being, will never be able to be seen by us, yet God still shows himself to us through visible, created things.

Many passages speak of the fact that God is not able to be seen. "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). Jesus says, "Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father" (John 6:46). Paul gives the following words of praise: "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17). He speaks of God as one "who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). John says, "No man has ever seen God" (1 John 4:12).

We must remember that these passages were all written after events in Scripture where people saw some outward manifestation of God. For example,

very early in Scripture we read, "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). Yet God told Moses, "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20). Nevertheless, God caused his glory to pass by Moses while he hid Moses in a cleft of the rock, and then God let Moses see his back after he had passed by, but said, "my face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:21 – 23). This sequence of verses and others like it in the Old Testament indicate that there was a sense in which God could not be seen at all, but that there was also some outward form or manifestation of God which at least in part was able to be seen by man.

It is right, therefore, to say that although God's total essence will never be able to be seen by us, nevertheless, God still shows something of himself to us through visible, created things. This happens in a variety of ways.

If we are to think of God, we must think of him somehow. God understands this and gives us hundreds of different analogies taken from our human lives or from the creative world.<sup>3</sup> This huge diversity of analogies from all parts of creation reminds us that we should not focus overly much on any one of these analogies. Yet if we do not focus exclusively on any one of these



analogies, all of them help to reveal God to us in a somewhat “visible” way (cf. Gen. 1:27; Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20).

The Old Testament also records a number of theophanies. A theophany is “an appearance of God.” In these theophanies God took on various visible forms to show himself to people. God appeared to Abraham (Gen. 18:1 – 33), Jacob (Gen. 32:28 – 30), the people of Israel (as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night: Ex. 13:21 – 22), the elders of Israel (Ex. 24:9 – 11), Manoah and his wife (Judg. 13:21 – 22), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1), and others.

A much greater visible manifestation of God than these Old Testament theophanies was found in the person of Jesus Christ himself. He could say, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). And John contrasts the fact that no one has ever seen God with the fact that God’s only Son has made him known to us: “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God,<sup>4</sup> who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18, author’s translation). Furthermore, Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), and is “the bright radiance of the glory of God” and is “the exact representation of his nature” (Heb. 1:3 author’s translation). Thus, in the person of Jesus we have a unique visible manifestation of God in the New Testament that was not available to believers who saw theophanies in the Old Testament.

But how will we see God in heaven? We will never be able to see or know all

of God, for “his greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3; cf. John 6:46; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; 1 John 4:12, which were mentioned above). And we will not be able to see—at least with our physical eyes—the spiritual being of God. Nevertheless, Scripture says that we will see God himself. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). We will be able to see the human nature of Jesus, of course (Rev. 1:7). But it is not clear in exactly what sense we will be able to “see” the Father and the Holy Spirit, or the divine nature of God the Son (cf. Rev. 1:4; 4:2 – 3, 5; 5:6). Perhaps the nature of this “seeing” will not be known to us until we reach heaven.

Although what we see will not be an exhaustive vision of God, it will be a completely true and clear and real vision of God. We shall see “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12) and “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The most remarkable description of the open, close fellowship with God that we shall experience is seen in the fact that in the heavenly city “the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:3 – 4).

When we realize that God is the perfection of all that we long for or desire, that he is the summation of everything beautiful or desirable, then we realize that the greatest joy of the life to come will be that we “shall see his face.” This seeing of God “face to face” has been called the beatific vision, meaning “the vision that makes us blessed or happy” (“beatific” is from two Latin words, *beatus*, “blessed,” and *facere*, “to make”). To look at God changes us and makes us like him: “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). This vision of God will be the consummation of our knowing God and will give us full delight and joy for all eternity: “in your presence there is fulness of joy, in your right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11).

## B. Mental Attributes

3. Knowledge (Omniscience). God’s knowledge may be defined as follows: God fully knows himself and all things actual and possible in one simple and eternal act.

Elihu says that God is the one “who is perfect in knowledge” (Job 37:16), and John says that God “knows everything” (1 John 3:20). The quality of knowing everything is called

omniscience, and because God knows everything, he is said to be omniscient (that is, “all-knowing”).

The definition given above explains omniscience in more detail. It says first

that God fully knows himself. This is an amazing fact since God’s own being is infinite or unlimited. Of course, only he who is infinite can fully know himself in every detail. This fact is implied by Paul when he says, “For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:10 – 11).

This idea is also suggested by John’s statement that “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). In this context “light” has a suggestion of both moral purity and full knowledge or awareness. If there is “no darkness at all” in God, but he is entirely “light,” then God is himself both entirely holy and also entirely filled with self-knowledge.

The definition also says that God knows “all things actual.” This means all things that exist and all things that happen. This applies to creation, for God is the one before whom “no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13; cf. 2 Chron. 16:9; Job 28:24; Matt. 10:29 – 30). God also knows the future, for he is the one who can say, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (Isa. 46:9 – 10; cf. 42:8 – 9 and frequent passages in the Old Testament prophets). He knows the tiny details of every one of our lives, for Jesus tells us, “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8), and, “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt. 10:30).

In Psalm 139 David reflects on the amazing detail of God’s knowledge of our lives. He knows our actions and thoughts: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Ps. 139:1 – 2). He knows the words we will say before they are spoken: “Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:4). And he knows all the days of our lives even before we are born: “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Ps. 139:16).

The definition of God’s knowledge given above also specifies that God knows “all things possible.” This is because there are some instances in Scripture where God gives information about events that might happen but that do not actually come to pass. For example, when David was fleeing from Saul he rescued the city of Keilah from the Philistines and then stayed for a time at Keilah. He decided to ask God whether Saul would come to Keilah to attack him

and, if Saul came, whether the men of Keilah would surrender him into Saul’s hand. David said: “Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant.” And the LORD said, “He will come down.” Then said David, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the LORD said, “They will surrender you.” Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. (1 Sam. 23:11 – 13)

Similarly, Jesus could state that Tyre and Sidon would have repented if Jesus’ own miracles had been done there in former days: “Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matt. 11:21). Similarly, he says, “And you, Capernaum, will you be

exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Matt. 11:23; cf. 2 Kings 13:19, where Elisha tells what would have happened if King Joash had struck the ground five or six times with the arrows).

The fact that God knows all things possible can also be deduced from God’s full knowledge of himself. If God fully knows himself, he knows everything he is able to do, which includes all things that are possible. This fact is indeed amazing. God has made an incredibly complex and varied universe. But there are thousands upon thousands of other variations or kinds of things that God could have created but did not. God’s infinite knowledge includes detailed knowledge of what each of those other possible creations would have been like and what would have happened in each of them! “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it” (Ps. 139:6). “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).

Our definition of God’s knowledge speaks of God knowing everything in one “simple act.” Here again the word simple is used in the sense “not divided into parts.” This means that God is always fully aware of everything. If he should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was

something he had not thought about for a time. Rather, he always knows all things at once. All of these facts and all other things that he knows are always fully present in his consciousness. He does not have to reason to conclusions or ponder carefully before he answers, for he knows the end from the beginning, and he never learns and never forgets anything (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8; and the verses cited above on God’s perfect knowledge). Every bit of God’s knowledge is always fully present in his consciousness; it never grows dim or fades into his nonconscious memory. Finally, the definition talks about God’s knowledge as not only a simple act but also an “eternal act.” This means that God’s knowledge never changes or grows. If he were ever to learn something new, he would not have been omniscient beforehand. Thus, from all eternity God has known all things that would happen and all things that he would do.

Someone may object that God promises to forget our sins. For example, he says, “I will not remember your sins” (Isa. 43:25). Yet passages like this can certainly be understood to mean that God will never again let the knowledge of these sins play any part in the way he relates to us: he will “forget” them in his relationship to us. Another objection to the biblical teaching about God’s omniscience has been brought from Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; and 31:35, where God refers to the horrible practices of parents who burn to death their own children in the sacrificial fires of the pagan god Baal, and says, “which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind” (Jer. 7:31). Does this mean that before the time of Jeremiah God had never thought of the possibility that parents would sacrifice their own children? Certainly not, for that very practice had occurred a century earlier in the reigns of Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and Hoshea (2 Kings 17:17), and God himself had forbidden the practice eight hundred years earlier under Moses (Lev. 18:21). The verses in Jeremiah are probably better translated quite literally, “nor did it enter into my heart” (so KJV at Jer. 7:31, and the literal translation in the NASB mg.—the Hebrew word is *leb*, most frequently translated “heart”), giving the sense, “nor did I wish for it, desire it, think of it in a positive way.”<sup>5</sup>

Another difficulty that arises in this connection is the question of the relationship between God’s knowledge of everything that will happen in the future and the reality and degree of freedom we

have in our actions. If God knows everything that will happen, how can our choices be at all “free”? In fact, this difficulty has loomed so large that some theologians have concluded that God does not know all of the future. They have said that God does not know things that cannot (in their opinion) be known, such as the free acts of people that have not yet occurred (sometimes the phrase used is the “contingent acts of

free moral agents,” where “contingent” means “possible but not certain”). But such a position is unsatisfactory because it essentially denies God’s knowledge of the future of human history at any point in time and thus is inconsistent with the passages cited above about God’s knowledge of the future and with dozens of other Old Testament prophetic passages where God predicts the future far in advance and in great detail.<sup>6</sup>

How then are we to resolve this difficulty? Although this question will be treated in much more detail in chapter 16 on God’s providence, it may be helpful at this point to note the suggestion of Augustine, who said that God has given us “reasonable self-determination.” His statement does not involve the terms free or freedom, for these terms are exceptionally difficult to define in any way that satisfactorily accounts for God’s complete knowledge of future events. But this statement does affirm what is important to us and what we sense to be true in our own experience, that our choices and decisions are “reasonable.” That is, we think about what to do, consciously decide what we will do, and then we follow the course of action that we have chosen.

Augustine’s statement also says that we have “self-determination.” This is simply affirming that our choices really do determine what will happen. It is not as if events occur regardless of what we decide or do, but rather that they occur because of what we decide and do. No attempt is made in this statement to define the sense in which we are “free” or “not free,” but that is not the really important issue: for us, it is important that we think, choose, and act, and that these thoughts, choices, and actions are real and actually have eternal significance. If God knows all our thoughts, words, and actions long before they occur, then there must be some sense in which our choices are not absolutely free. But further definition of this issue is better left until it can be treated more fully in chapter 16.

????????? God’s wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals. This definition goes beyond the idea of God knowing all things and specifies that God’s decisions about what he will do are always wise decisions: that is, they always will bring about the best results (from God’s ultimate perspective), and they will bring about those results through the best possible means.

Scripture affirms God’s wisdom in general in several places. He is called “the only wise God” (Rom. 16:27). Job says that God “is wise in heart” (Job 9:4), and “With him are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding”

(Job 12:13). God’s wisdom is seen specifically in creation. The psalmist exclaims, “O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures” (Ps. 104:24). As God created the universe, it was perfectly suited to bring him glory, both in its day-by-day processes and in the goals for which he created it. Even now, while we still see the effects of sin and the curse on the natural world, we should be amazed at how harmonious and intricate God’s creation is.

God’s wisdom is also seen in his great plan of redemption. Christ is “the wisdom of God” to those who are called (1 Cor. 1:24, 30), even though the word of the cross is “foolishness” to

those who reject it and think themselves to be wise in this world (1 Cor. 1:18 – 20). Yet even this is a reflection of God’s wise plan: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:21, 27, 29).

Paul knows that what we now think of as the “simple” gospel message, understandable even to the very young, reflects an amazing plan of God, which in its depths of wisdom surpasses anything man could ever have imagined. At the end of eleven chapters of reflection on the wisdom of God’s plan of redemption, Paul bursts forth into spontaneous praise: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

When Paul preaches the gospel both to Jews and to Gentiles, and they become unified in the one body of Christ (Eph. 3:6), the incredible “mystery” that was “hidden for ages in God who created all things” (Eph. 3:9) is plain for all to see, namely, that in Christ such totally diverse people become united. When groups so different racially and culturally become members of the one body of Christ, then God’s purpose is fulfilled, “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10).

Today this means that God’s wisdom is shown even to angels and demons (“principalities and powers”) when people from different racial and cultural backgrounds are united in Christ in the church. If the Christian church is faithful to God’s wise plan, it will be always in the forefront in breaking down racial and social barriers in societies around the world, and will thus be a visible manifestation of God’s amazingly wise plan to bring great unity out of great diversity and thereby to cause all creation to honor him.

God’s wisdom is also shown in our individual lives. “We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28, author’s translation). Here Paul affirms that God does work wisely in all the things that come into our lives, and that through all these things he advances us toward the goal of conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). It should be our great confidence and a source of peace day by day to know that God causes all things to move us toward the ultimate goal he has for our lives, namely, that we might be like Christ and thereby bring glory to him. Such confidence enabled Paul to accept his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7) as something that, though painful, God in his wisdom had chosen not to remove (2 Cor. 12:8 – 10).

Every day of our lives, we may quiet our discouragement with the comfort that comes from the knowledge of God’s infinite wisdom: if we are his children, we can know that he is working wisely in our lives, even today, to bring us into greater conformity into the image of Christ.

God’s wisdom is, of course, in part communicable to us. We can ask God confidently for wisdom when we need it, for he promises in his Word, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him” (James 1:5). This wisdom, or skill in living a life pleasing to God, comes primarily from reading and obeying his Word: “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7; cf. Deut. 4:6 – 8).

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; cf. Prov. 1:7), because if we fear dishonoring God or displeasing him, and if we fear his fatherly discipline,

then we will have the motivation that makes us want to follow his ways and live according to his wise commands. Furthermore, the possession of wisdom from God will result not in pride but in humility (Prov. 11:2; James 3:13), not in arrogance but in a gentle and peaceful spirit (James 3:14 – 18). The person who is wise according to God's standards will continually walk in dependence on the Lord and with a desire to exalt him.

Yet we must also remember that God's wisdom is not entirely communicable: we can never fully share God's wisdom (Rom. 11:33). In practical terms, this means that there will frequently be times in this life when we will not be able to understand why God allowed something to happen. Then we have simply to trust him and go on obeying his wise commands for our lives: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19; cf. Deut. 29:29; Prov. 3:5 – 6). God is

infinitely wise and we are not, and it pleases him when we have faith to trust his wisdom even when we do not understand what he is doing.

5. Truthfulness (and Faithfulness). God's truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth.

The term veracity, which means "truthfulness" or "reliability," has sometimes been used as a synonym for God's truthfulness.

The first part of this definition indicates that the God revealed in Scripture is the true or real God and that all other so-called gods are idols. "The LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King.... The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens" (Jer. 10:10 – 11). Jesus says to his Father, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3; cf. 1 John 5:20).

We might ask what it means to be the true God as opposed to other beings who are not God. It must mean that God in his own being or character is the one who fully conforms to the idea of what God should be: namely, a being who is infinitely perfect in power, in wisdom, in goodness, in lordship over time and space, and so forth. But we may further ask, whose idea of God is this? What idea of God must one conform to in order to be the true God?

At this point our train of thought becomes somewhat circular, for we must not say that a being must conform to our idea of what God should be like in order to be the true God! We are mere creatures! We cannot define what the true God must be like! So we must say that it is God himself who has the only perfect idea of what the true God should be like. And he himself is the true God because in his being and character he perfectly conforms to his own idea of what the true God should be. In addition, he has implanted in our minds a reflection of his own idea of what the true God must be, and this enables us to recognize him as God.

The definition given above also affirms that all of God's knowledge is true and is the final standard of truth. Job tells us that God is "perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16; see also the verses cited above under the discussion of God's omniscience). To say that God knows all things and that his knowledge is perfect is to say that he is never mistaken in his perception or understanding of the world: all that he knows and thinks is true and is a correct understanding of the nature of reality. In fact, since God knows all things infinitely well, we can say

that the standard of true knowledge is conformity to God's knowledge. If we think the same thing God thinks about anything in the universe, we are thinking truthfully about it.

Our definition also affirms that God's words are both true and the final standard of truth. This means that God is reliable and faithful in his words. With respect to his promises, God always does what he promises to do, and we can depend on him never to be unfaithful to his promises. Thus, he is "a God of faithfulness" (Deut. 32:4). In fact, this specific aspect of God's truthfulness is sometimes viewed as a distinct attribute: God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised (Num. 23:19; cf. 2 Sam. 7:28; Ps. 141:6, et al.). He can be relied upon, and he will never prove unfaithful to those who trust what he has said. Indeed, the essence of true faith is taking God at his word and relying on him to do as he has promised.

In addition to the fact that God is faithful to his promises, we must also affirm that all of God's words about himself and about his creation completely correspond to reality. That is, God always speaks truth when he speaks. He is "the unlying God" (Titus 1:2, author's translation), the God for whom it is impossible to lie (Heb. 6:18), the God whose every word is perfectly "pure" (Ps. 12:6), the one of whom it can be said, "Every word of God proves true" (Prov. 30:5). God's words are not simply true in the sense that they conform to some standard of truthfulness outside of God. Rather, they are truth itself; they are the final standard and definition of truth. So Jesus can say to the Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). What was said about the truthfulness of God's knowledge can also be said about God's words, for they are based on his perfect knowledge and accurately reflect that perfect knowledge: God's words are "truth" in the sense that they are the final standard by which truthfulness is to be judged: whatever conforms to God's own words is also true, and what fails to conform to his words is not true.

The truthfulness of God is also communicable in that we can in part imitate it by striving to have true knowledge about God and about his world. In fact, as we begin to think true thoughts about God and creation, thoughts that we learn from Scripture and from allowing Scripture to guide us in our observation and interpretation of the natural world, we begin to think God's own thoughts after him! We can exclaim with the psalmist, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!" (Ps. 139:17).

This realization should encourage us in the pursuit of knowledge in all areas of the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Whatever the area of our

investigation, when we discover more truth about the nature of reality, we discover more of the truth that God already knows. In this sense we can affirm that "all truth is God's truth"<sup>7</sup> and rejoice whenever the learning or discovery of this truth is used in ways pleasing to God. Growth in knowledge is part of the process of becoming more like God or becoming creatures who are more fully in God's image. Paul tells us that we have put on the "new nature," which, he says, "is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Col. 3:10).

In a society that is exceedingly careless with the truthfulness of spoken words, we as God's children are to imitate our Creator and take great care to be sure that our words are always truthful. "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature" (Col. 3:9 – 10). Again Paul admonishes, "Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor" (Eph. 4:25). In his own ministry, Paul says that he sought to practice absolute truthfulness: "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). God is pleased when his people put "devious talk" far from them

(Prov. 4:24) and speak with words that are acceptable not only in the sight of people but also in the sight of the Lord himself (Ps. 19:14).

Furthermore, we should imitate God's truthfulness in our own reaction to truth and falsehood. Like God, we should love truth and hate falsehood. The commandment not to bear false witness against our neighbor (Ex. 20:16), like the other commandments, requires not merely outward conformity but also conformity in heart attitude. One who is pleasing to God "speaks truth from his heart" (Ps. 15:2), and strives to be like the righteous man who "hates falsehood" (Prov. 13:5). God commands his people through Zechariah, "Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, says the LORD" (Zech. 8:17).

These commands are given because God himself loves truth and hates falsehood: "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight" (Prov. 12:22; cf. Isa. 59:3 – 4). Falsehood and lying come not from God but from Satan, who delights in falsehood: "When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). It is appropriate then that with "the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted" and the "murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, [and] idolaters" who are found in "the lake that burns with fire and sulphur" far from the heavenly city, are found also

"all liars" (Rev. 21:8).

Thus, Scripture teaches us that lying is wrong not only because of the great harm that comes from it (and much more harm comes from lying than we often realize), but also for an even deeper and more profound reason: when we lie we dishonor God and diminish his glory, for we, as those created in God's image and created for the purpose of reflecting God's glory in our lives, are acting in a way that is contrary to God's own character.

### C. Moral Attributes

6. Goodness. The goodness of God means that God is the final standard of good, and that all that God is and does is worthy of approval.

In this definition we find a situation similar to the one we faced in defining God as the true God. Here, "good" can be understood to mean "worthy of approval," but we have not answered the question, approval by whom? In one sense, we can say that anything that is truly good should be worthy of approval by us. But in a more ultimate sense, we are not free to decide by ourselves what is worthy of approval and what is not. Ultimately, therefore, God's being and actions are perfectly worthy of his own approval. He is therefore the final standard of good. Jesus implies this when he says, "No one is good but God alone" (Luke 18:19). The Psalms frequently affirm that "the LORD is good" (Ps. 100:5) or exclaim, "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good" (Pss. 106:1; 107:1, et al.). David encourages us, "O taste and see that the LORD is good!" (Ps. 34:8).

But if God is himself good and therefore the ultimate standard of good, then we have a definition of the meaning of "good" that will greatly help us in the study of ethics and aesthetics. What is "good"? "Good" is what God approves. We may ask then, why is what God approves good? We must answer, "Because he approves it." That is to say, there is no higher standard of goodness than God's own character and his approval of whatever is consistent with that character. Nonetheless, God has given us some reflection of his own sense of goodness, so that when we evaluate things in the way God created us to evaluate them, we will also approve what God approves and delight in things in which he delights.



Our definition also states that all that God does is worthy of approval. We see evidence of this in the creation narrative: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The psalmist connects the

goodness of God with the goodness of his actions: “You are good and you do good; teach me your statutes” (Ps. 119:68). Psalm 104 is an excellent example of praise to God for his goodness in creation, while many Psalms, such as Psalms 106 and 107, give thanks to God for his goodness in all his actions toward his people. And Paul encourages us to discover in practice how God’s will for our lives is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

Scripture also tells us that God is the source of all good in the world. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17; cf. Ps. 145:9; Acts 14:17). Moreover, God does only good things for his children. We read, “No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). And in the same context in which Paul assures us that “in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28), he also says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom. 8:32). Much more than an earthly father, our heavenly Father will “give good things to those who ask him” (Matt. 7:11), and even his discipline is a manifestation of his love and is for our good (Heb. 12:10). This knowledge of God’s great goodness should encourage us to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18).

In imitation of this communicable attribute, we should ourselves do good (that is, we should do what God approves) and thereby imitate the goodness of our heavenly Father. Paul writes, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10; cf. Luke 6:27, 33 – 35; 2 Tim. 3:17). Moreover, when we realize that God is the definition and source of all good, we will realize that God himself is the ultimate good that we seek. We will say with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” (Ps. 73:25 – 26; cf. 16:11; 42:1 – 2).

God’s goodness is closely related to several other characteristics of his nature, among them love, mercy, patience, and grace. Sometimes these are considered separate attributes and are treated individually. At other times these are considered part of God’s goodness and are treated as various aspects of God’s goodness. In this chapter we will treat love as a separate attribute since it is so prominent in Scripture. The other three characteristics (mercy, patience, and grace), while also prominent in Scripture, will be treated together as aspects of God’s goodness to individuals in specific situations. Thus, God’s mercy is his

goodness toward those in distress, his grace is his goodness toward those who deserve only punishment, and his patience is his goodness toward those who continue to sin over a period of time (see below, section C.8, on mercy, patience, and grace).

????????? God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.

This definition understands love as self-giving for the benefit of others. This attribute of God shows that it is part of his nature to give of himself in order to bring about blessing or good for others.

John tells us that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). We see evidence that this attribute of God was active even before creation among the members of the Trinity. Jesus speaks to his Father of “my glory which you have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world” (John

17:24), thus indicating that there was love and a giving of honor from the Father to the Son from all eternity. It continues at the present time, for we read, “The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35).

This love is also reciprocal, for Jesus says, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31). The love between the Father and the Son also presumably characterizes their relationship with the Holy Spirit, even though it is not explicitly mentioned. This eternal love of the Father for the Son, the Son for the Father, and of both for the Holy Spirit makes heaven a world of love and joy because each person of the Trinity seeks to bring joy and happiness to the other two.

The self-giving that characterizes the Trinity finds clear expression in God’s relationship to mankind, and especially to sinful men. “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” (1 John 4:10, author’s translation). Paul writes, “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). John also writes, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Paul also speaks of “the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20), thus showing an awareness of the directly personal application of Christ’s love to individual sinners. It should cause us great joy to know that it is the purpose of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to give of themselves to us to bring us true joy and happiness. It is God’s nature to act that way toward those upon whom he has set his love, and he will continue to act that way toward us for all eternity.

We imitate this communicable attribute of God, first by loving God in return,

and second by loving others in imitation of the way God loves them. All our obligations to God can be summarized in this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself “ (Matt. 22:37 – 38). If we love God, we will obey his commandments (1 John 5:3) and thus do what is pleasing to him. We will love God, not the world (1 John 2:15), and we will do all this because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

It is one of the most amazing facts in all Scripture that just as God’s love involves his giving of himself to make us happy, so we can in return give of ourselves and actually bring joy to God’s heart. Isaiah promises God’s people, “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5), and Zephaniah tells God’s people, “The LORD, your God, is in your midst . . . he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival” (Zeph. 3:17 – 18).

Our imitation of God’s love is also seen in our love for others. John makes this explicit: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). In fact, our love for others within the fellowship of believers is so evidently an imitation of Christ that by it the world recognizes us as his: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35; cf. 15:13; Rom. 13:10; 1 Cor. 13:4 – 7; Heb. 10:24). God himself gives us his love to enable us to love each other (John 17:26; Rom. 5:5). Moreover, our love for our enemies especially reflects God’s love (Matt. 5:43 – 48).

8. Mercy, Grace, Patience. God’s mercy, patience, and grace may be seen as three separate attributes, or as specific aspects of God’s goodness. The definitions given here show these attributes as special examples of God’s goodness when it is used for the benefit of specific classes of people.

God's mercy means God's goodness toward those in misery and distress. God's grace means God's goodness toward those who deserve only punishment.

God's patience means God's goodness in withholding of punishment toward those who sin over a period of time.

These three characteristics of God's nature are often mentioned together, especially in the Old Testament. When God declared his name to Moses, he proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). David says in Psalm 103:8, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Because these characteristics of God are often mentioned together, it may seem difficult to distinguish among them. Yet the characteristic of mercy is often emphasized where people are in misery or distress. David says, for example, "I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the LORD for his mercy is great . . ." (2 Sam. 24:14). The two blind men who wish Jesus to see their plight and heal them cry, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (Matt. 9:27). When Paul speaks of the fact that God comforts us in affliction, he calls God the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).<sup>8</sup> In time of need, we are to draw near to God's throne so that we might receive both mercy and grace (Heb. 4:16; cf. 2:17; James 5:11). We are to imitate God's mercy in our conduct toward others: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7; cf. 2 Cor. 1:3 – 4).

With respect to the attribute of grace, we find that Scripture emphasizes that God's grace, or his favor toward those who deserve no favor but only punishment, is never obligated but is always freely given on God's part. God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Ex. 33:19; quoted in Rom. 9:15). Yet God is regularly gracious toward his people: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, After Thy manner with those who love Thy name" (Ps. 119:132 NASB). In fact, Peter can call God "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10).

Grace as God's goodness especially shown to those who do not deserve it is seen frequently in Paul's writings. He emphasizes that salvation by grace is the opposite of salvation by human effort, for grace is a freely given gift. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23 – 24). The distinction between grace and a salvation earned by works that merit a reward is also seen in Romans 11:6: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." Grace, then, is God's favor freely given to those who do not deserve this favor.

Paul also sees that if grace is unmerited, then there is only one human attitude appropriate as an instrument for receiving such grace, namely, faith: "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace..." (Rom. 4:16). Faith is the one human attitude that is the opposite of depending on oneself, for it involves trust in or dependence upon another. Thus, it is devoid of

self-reliance or attempts to gain righteousness by human effort. If God's favor is to come to us apart from our own merit, then it must come when we depend not on our own merit but on the merits of another, and that is precisely when we have faith.

In the New Testament, and especially in Paul, not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the entire living of the Christian life can be seen to result from God's continuous bestowal of grace. Paul can say, "by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10). Luke speaks of Antioch as the

place where Paul and Barnabas “had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled” (Acts 14:26), indicating that the church there, in sending out Paul and Barnabas, saw the success of their ministry as dependent upon God’s continuing grace. Furthermore, the blessing of “grace” upon Paul’s readers is the most frequent apostolic blessing in his letters (see, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 16:20; 1 Cor. 1:3; 16:23; 2 Cor. 1:2; 13:14; Gal. 1:3; 6:18).

God’s patience, similarly, was mentioned in some of the verses cited above in connection with God’s mercy. The Old Testament frequently speaks of God as “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3, et al.). In the New Testament, Paul speaks about God’s “kindness and forbearance and patience” (Rom. 2:4), and says that Jesus Christ displayed his “perfect patience” toward Paul himself as an example for others (1 Tim. 1:16; cf. Rom. 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20).

We are also to imitate God’s patience and be “slow to anger” (James 1:19), and be patient in suffering as Christ was (1 Peter 2:20). We are to lead a life “with patience” (Eph. 4:2), and “patience” is listed among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 (see also Rom. 8:25; 1 Cor. 13:4; Col. 1:11; 3:12; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2; James 5:7 – 8; Rev. 2:2 – 3; et al.). As with most of the attributes of God that we are to imitate in our lives, patience requires a moment-by-moment trust in God to fulfill his promises and purposes in our lives at his chosen time. Our confidence that the Lord will soon fulfill his purposes for our good and his glory will enable us to be patient. James makes this connection when he says, “You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:8).

9. Holiness. God’s holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor. This definition contains both a relational quality (separation from) and a moral quality (the separation is from sin or evil, and the devotion is to the good of God’s own honor or glory). The idea of holiness as

including both separation from evil and devotion to God’s own glory is found in a number of Old Testament passages. The word holy is used to describe both parts of the tabernacle, for example. The tabernacle itself was a place separate from the evil and sin of the world, and the first room in it was called the “holy place.” It was dedicated to God’s service. But then God commanded that there be a veil, “and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy” (Ex. 26:33). The most holy place, where the ark of the covenant was kept, was the place most separated from evil and sin and most fully devoted to God’s service.

The place where God himself dwelt was itself holy: “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps. 24:3). The element of dedication to God’s service is seen in the holiness of the sabbath day: “the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy” (or “hallowed it”; the verb is a Piel form of qamdash and means “to make holy”) (Ex. 20:11; cf. Gen. 2:3). The sabbath day was made holy because it was set apart from the ordinary activities of the world and dedicated to God’s service. In the same way the tabernacle and the altar, as well as Aaron and his sons, were to be “made holy” (Ex. 29:44), that is, set apart from ordinary tasks and from the evil and sin of the world and dedicated to God’s service (cf. Ex. 30:25 – 33).

God himself is the Most Holy One. He is called the “Holy One of Israel” (Pss. 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isa. 1:4; 5:19, 24, et al.). The seraphim around God’s throne cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). “The LORD our God is holy!” exclaims the psalmist (Ps. 99:9; cf. 99:3, 5; 22:3).

God’s holiness provides the pattern for his people to imitate. He commands them, “You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2; cf. 11:44 – 45; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:16). When

God called his people out of Egypt and brought them to himself and commanded them to obey his voice, then he said, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:4 – 6). In this case the idea of separation from evil and sin (which here included in a very striking way separation from life in Egypt) and the idea of devotion to God (in serving him and in obeying his statutes) are both seen in the example of a “holy nation.”

New covenant believers are also to “strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14) and to know that God’s discipline is given to us “that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). Paul encourages Christians to be separate from the dominating influence that comes from close

association with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14 – 18) and then encourages them, “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1; cf. Rom. 12:1). The church itself is intended by God to grow “into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21), and Christ’s present work for the church is “that he might sanctify her . . . that he might present the church to himself in splendor . . . that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26 – 27). Not only individuals but also the church itself must grow in holiness!

Zechariah prophesies a day when everything on earth will be “holy to the LORD.” He says:

And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to the LORD.” And the pots in the house of the LORD shall be as the bowls before the altar; and every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the LORD of hosts. (Zech. 14:20 – 21)

At that time, everything on earth will be separated from evil, purified from sin, and devoted to the service of God in true moral purity.

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10. Peace (or Order). In 1 Corinthians 14:33 Paul says, “God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” Although “peace” and “order” have not traditionally been classified as attributes of God, Paul here indicates another quality that we could think of as a distinct attribute of God. Paul says that God’s actions are characterized by “peace” and not by “disorder” (Gk. akatastasia, a word meaning “disorder, confusion, unrest”). God himself is “the God of peace” (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20; cf. Eph. 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:16). But those who walk in wickedness do not have peace: “ ‘There is no peace,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked’ ” (Isa. 48:22; 57:21; cf. 59:8).

However, when God looks with compassion upon the people whom he loves, he sees them as “afflicted . . . storm-tossed (LXX, akatastatos, “in disorder, in confusion”), and not comforted” (Isa. 54:11), and promises to establish their foundations with precious stones (Isa. 54:11 – 12) and lead them forth in “peace”, Isaiah 55:12. The proclamation of God’s plan of redemption contains the promise of peace to God’s people (Psalms 29:11; 85:8; 119:165; Proverbs 3:17; Isaiah 9:6 – 7; 26:3; 57:19; John 14:27; Romans 8:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:16; . In fact, the third element that Paul lists as part of the fruit of the Spirit is “peace”, Galatians 5:22.

This peace certainly does not imply inactivity, for it was at a time of intense growth and activity that Luke could say that “the church throughout all Judea

and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up” (Acts 9:31). Furthermore, although God is a God of peace, he is also the one who “will neither slumber nor sleep”, Psalms 121:4. He is the

God who is continually working (John 5 17). And even though heaven is a place of peace, it is a place also of continual praise to God and service for him.

Thus, God's peace can be defined as follows: God's peace means that in God's being and in his actions he is separate from all confusion and disorder, yet he is continually active in innumerable well-ordered, fully controlled, simultaneous actions.

This definition indicates that God's peace does not have to do with inactivity, but with ordered and controlled activity. To engage in infinite activity of this sort, of course, requires God's infinite wisdom, knowledge, and power.

When we understand God's peace in this way we can see an imitation of this attribute of God not only in "peace" as part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 22 – 23, but also in the last-mentioned element in the fruit of the Spirit, namely, "self-control" (Galatians 5:23). When we as God's people walk in his ways, we come to know more and more fully by experience that the kingdom of God is indeed "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14 17), and we can say of the path of God's wisdom, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs 3 17).

11. Righteousness, Justice. In English the terms righteousness and justice are different words, but in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament there is only one word group behind these two English terms. (In the Old Testament the terms primarily translate forms of the tsedek word group, and the New Testament members of the dikaios word group.) Therefore, these two terms will be considered together as speaking of one attribute of God.

God's righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right.

Speaking of God, Moses says, "All his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deuteronomy 32 4). Abraham successfully appeals to God's own character of righteousness when he says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?", Genesis 18 25. God also speaks and commands what is right: "The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart" (Psalms 19 8). And God says of himself, "I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right" (Isaiah 45 19). As a result of God's righteousness, it is necessary that he treat people according to what they deserve. Thus, it is necessary that

God punish sin, for it does not deserve reward; it is wrong and deserves punishment.

When God does not punish sin, it seems to indicate that he is unrighteous, unless some other means of punishing sin can be seen. This is why Paul says that when God sent Christ as a sacrifice to bear the punishment for sin, it "was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3 25 – 26). When Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins it showed that God was truly righteous, because he did give appropriate punishment to sin, even though he did forgive his people their sins.

With respect to the definition of righteousness given above, we may ask, what is "right"? In other words, what ought to happen and what ought to be? Here we must respond that whatever

conforms to God's moral character is right. But why is whatever conforms to God's moral character right? It is right because it conforms to his moral character! If indeed God is the final standard of righteousness, then there can be no standard outside of God by which we measure righteousness or justice. He himself is the final standard. (This is similar to the situation we encountered with respect to truth and God being the ultimate standard of truth.) Whenever Scripture confronts the question of whether God himself is righteous or not, the ultimate answer is always that we as God's creatures have no right to say that God is unrighteous or unjust. The creature cannot say that of the Creator. Paul responds to a very difficult question about God's righteousness by saying, "But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" (Romans 9 20 – 21).

In answer to Job's questioning about whether God has been righteous in his dealings with him, God answers Job, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? . . . Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" (Job 40 2, 8). Then God answers not in terms of an explanation that would allow Job to understand why God's actions were right, but rather in terms of a statement of God's own majesty and power! God does not need to explain the rightness of his actions to Job, for God is the Creator and Job is the creature. "Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?" (Job 40 9). "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place . . .?" (Job 38 12). "Can you lift up

your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are?'" (Job 38 34 – 35). "Do you give the horse his might?" (Job 39 19). "Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south?" (Job 39 26). Job answers, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40 4).

Nevertheless, it should be a cause for thanksgiving and gratitude when we realize that righteousness and omnipotence are both possessed by God. If he were a God of perfect righteousness without power to carry out that righteousness, he would not be worthy of worship and we would have no guarantee that justice will ultimately prevail in the universe. But if he were a God of unlimited power, yet without righteousness in his character, how unthinkable horrible the universe would be! There would be unrighteousness at the center of all existence and there would be nothing anyone could do to change it. Existence would become meaningless, and we would be driven to the most utter despair. We ought therefore continually to thank and praise God for who he is, "for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deuteronomy 32 4).

12. Jealousy. Although the word jealous is frequently used in a negative sense in English, it also takes a positive sense at times. For example, Paul says to the Corinthians, "I feel a divine jealousy for you", 2 Corinthians 11 2. Here the sense is "earnestly protective or watchful." It has the meaning of being deeply committed to seeking the honor or welfare of someone, whether oneself or someone else.

Scripture represents God as being jealous in this way. He continually and earnestly seeks to protect his own honor. He commands his people not to bow down to idols or serve them, saying,

“for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exodus 20 5). He desires that worship be given to himself and not to false gods. Therefore, he commands the people of Israel to tear down the altars of pagan gods in the land of Canaan, giving the following reason: “For you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God”, Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 4 24; 5 9).

Thus, God’s jealousy may be defined as follows: God’s jealousy means that God continually seeks to protect his own honor.

People sometimes have trouble thinking that jealousy is a desirable attribute in God. This is because jealousy for our own honor as human beings is almost always wrong. We are not to be proud, but humble. Yet we must realize that the reason pride is wrong is a theological reason: it is that we do not deserve the honor that belongs to God alone, 1 Corinthians 4 7; Revelations 4 11).

It is not wrong for God to seek his own honor, however, for he deserves it fully. God freely admits that his actions in creation and redemption are done for his own honor. Speaking of his decision to withhold judgment from his people, God says, “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it. . . My glory I will not give to another”, Isaiah 48 11. It is healthy for us spiritually when we settle in our hearts the fact that God deserves all honor and glory from his creation, and that it is right for him to seek this honor. He alone is infinitely worthy of being praised. To realize this fact and to delight in it is to find the secret of true worship.

It may surprise us to find how frequently the Bible talks about the wrath of God. Yet if God loves all that is right and good, and all that conforms to his moral character, then it should not be surprising that he would hate everything that is opposed to his moral character. God’s wrath directed against sin is therefore closely related to God’s holiness and justice. God’s wrath may be defined as follows: God’s wrath means that he intensely hates all sin.

Descriptions of God’s wrath are found frequently in the narrative passages of Scripture, especially when God’s people sin greatly against him. God sees the idolatry of the people of Israel and says to Moses, “I have seen this people . . .; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (Exodus 32 9 – 10). Later Moses tells the people, “Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. . . Even at Horeb you provoked the LORD to wrath, and the LORD was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you” (Deuteronomy 97 – 8; 29:23; 2 Kings 22 13).

The doctrine of the wrath of God in Scripture is not limited to the Old Testament, however, as some have falsely imagined. We read in John 3 36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.” Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men” (Romians 1 18; 2 5, 8; 5 9; 9 22; Colossians 3 6; 1 Thessolonians 1 10; 2 16; 5 9; Hebrews 3 11; Revelation 6 16 – 17; 19 15). Many more New Testament verses also indicate God’s wrath against sin.

As with the other attributes of God, this is an attribute for which we should thank and praise God. It may not immediately appear to us how this can be done, since wrath seems to be such a negative concept. Viewed alone, it would arouse only fear and dread. Yet it is helpful for us to



ask what God would be like if he were a God that did not hate sin. He would then be a God who either delighted in sin or at least was not troubled by it. Such a God would not be worthy of our worship, for sin is hateful and it is worthy of being hated. Sin ought not to be. It is in fact a virtue to hate evil and sin, Hebrews 1 9; Zechariah 8 17, and we rightly imitate this attribute of God when we feel hatred against great evil, injustice, and sin.

Furthermore, we should feel no fear of God's wrath as Christians, for although "we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind", Ephesians 2 3, we now have trusted in Jesus, "who delivers us from the wrath to come", 1 Thessalonians 1 10; Romans 5 10. When we meditate on the wrath of God, we will be amazed to think that our Lord Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God that was due to our sin, in order that we might be saved, Romans 3 25 – 26.

Moreover, in thinking about God's wrath we must also bear in mind his patience. Both patience and wrath are mentioned together in Psalms 103 "The LORD is . . . slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever", Psalms 103 8 – 9. In fact, the delay of the execution of God's wrath upon evil is for the purpose of leading people to repentance, Romans 2 4.

Thus, when we think of God's wrath to come, we should simultaneously be thankful for his patience in waiting to execute that wrath in order that yet more people may be saved: "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise . . ." ,2 Peter 3 9 – 10. God's wrath should motivate us to evangelism and should also cause us to be thankful that God finally will punish all wrongdoing and will reign over new heavens and a new earth in which there will be no unrighteousness.