

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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THE MAJESTIC BEING OF GOD (Part II)

Noted church historian Gerald Bray points out that the Christian doctrine of God contains two distinct, though obviously related, aspects: *who* is God and *what* is God like?¹ At our recent conference with Fred Sanders, we sought to answer the first of these by examining the Scriptural support for the doctrine of the Trinity. When we turn our attention to the question of *what* is God like, we should heed the wisdom of Calvin, “Those who propose to inquire what the essence of God is only delude us with frigid speculations, it being much more our interest to know what kind of being God is, and what things are agreeable to his nature.”² We today run the risk of developing a picture of God that is taken more from our culture than from the Bible. The way this happens is seen in J. B. Phillips’ little book, *Your God Is Too Small*. He shows how we form various pictures of the nature of God, based at least in part on taking only part of the biblical picture of God and amplifying it. One is God as the resident police officer, a severe, demanding God who delights in catching his people in violations of the law and finding them guilty.³ Another picture, common in our time and in some ways the opposite of this view, is God as the heavenly grandfather. This God is permissive, indulgent, always willing to look the other way to smile when human beings misbehave, not really being too strict a disciplinarian. These conceptions of God, if understood and responded to contently, produce different types of religious experience. These may function on the conscious level, but they do affect our attitudes and actions. The person or the congregation who see God as the heavenly police officer will frequently be people whose Christian lives are characterized by fear and by judgment, directed both toward themselves and others. There may be a considerable legalism, of measuring spirituality by conformity to the teachings of Scripture, and even a tendency toward Phariseism, of thinking of oneself as superior to others who do not follow these teachings as closely. On the other hand, a church or individual Christian who thinks of God on the model of the celestial grandfather may turn out to be rather casual about spirituality and not too sensitive to sin, since God does not hold it against us. An excellent way to maintain one’s theological balance is to go back to the historic Reformed documents to see what they had to say. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* declares, “There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth. In His sight all things are open and manifest. His knowledge is infinite and infallible, and independent [that is, not dependent] upon the creature, so as nothing is to Him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all His counsel, in all His works, and in all His commands. To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them.” (ch. 2, sec.1, 2). *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Question 4), which the same Assembly prepared for the church’s children,

reduces all of this to the following: “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” -- which statement Charles Hodge has characterized as “probably the best (extra-biblical) definition of God ever penned by man.”⁴ This Shorter Catechism definition will therefore be employed here as the skeletal framework for this study.

I. GOD IS ETERNAL IN HIS BEING. *1 Tim 1:17* reads, “Now to the King eternal (*tō de basilei tōn*), immortal (*aphthartō*), invisible (*aorato*), the only God (*monō theo*), be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” This is not the only passage of Scripture that ascribes *everlastingness* to God. Note the following. *Genesis 21:33*: “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree (a small evergreen) in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.” *Psalms 29:10*: “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood, the Lord is enthroned as king forever.” *Psalms 45:6*: “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.” (See *Heb. 1:8*, where the writer applies this passage to the Son of God, and *Heb. 13:8*, where the writer says of Jesus Christ: “Yesterday and today [he is] the same forever.”) *Psalms 48:14*: “For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.” *Psalms 90:2, 4*: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God . . . a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.” (See also *2 Peter 3:8*: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”) *Psalms 102:25-27*: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain the same, and your years will never end.” (See *Heb. 1:10-12*, where the writer applies this passage to the Son of God.) *Isaiah 40:28*: “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

II. GOD AND TIME. Does God experience time like we do? Are all things past, present and future always present to Him? Good theologians disagree. Robert Reymond contends that God *does* experience time. He points to texts like *Rom. 9:29*, “He chose us in him *before (pro)* the creation of the world” (*Eph. 1:4*; see also *John 17:34*). Does not God inform us in these verses that he had a plan (his “eternal purpose”) *before* he created the world? Does this data not mean that *before* the creation of the world God could have said, indeed, would have had to say as the God of truth if an angel had asked him about the “when” of the world’s creation: “I have not yet created the world. Its creation is still in the future?” And does he not now have to say as the God of truth: “I have created the world; its creation is no longer in the future, it is *now* in the past?” It would certainly seem that the past is past for God, the present is present for God, and the future is future for God, as surely as they are for us! And while he certainly and infallibly *knows* the future because he ordained it, it is still as the *future* that he knows it. If God’s “time-words” to us respecting his plans and actions do not mean for God the same as they mean for us, then *for him* the creation of the world may not have actually occurred yet, *for him* Christ’s first coming may still be only a thing of predictive prophecy, *for him* Christ’s second coming may be a thing of the past, *for him* the Christian may still be in his sin and still under divine condemnation, or *for him* these things and everything else may be past, present, and future all at the same time. In short, if God is timeless and if all of his acts are for him timeless acts, then we can have no true and certain knowledge of anything except perhaps pure mathematics.”⁵ Millard Erickson argues otherwise, “If God is metaphysically outside of space-time, how does he influence what happens within it? It would appear that the direct working of God is simply by his thinking or willing something to be. In other words, his actions are in some sense acts of creation. If God in his mind thinks something to be the case, it is. This does not require him to exert physical influence on the physical universe. In this sense, his activity influencing the physical world is parallel to his non-perceptual knowledge of the creation. As problematic as is the body-soul problem, there may be something of an illustration or analogy here. When I move my hand, how do I do it? I simply will it to happen, and it occurs (assuming I do not have any neurological ailments). Unless we are prepared to accept a materialistic monistic view of human nature, there would appear to be some help here for understanding the action of God in and on a space-time universe.” “The incarnation is evidence that at one point in space-time, God (or at least the second member of the Trinity) entered our universe

metaphysically. He became more than just influentially or causally immanent; he became metaphysically immanent. He took on a physical body. Whatever God is, he is capable of entering space-time metaphysically and certainly also causally. Tentatively, we may then hold that prior to the creation, God was both absolutely timeless and spaceless. With the creation of the physical and temporal universe, however, he became related to that universe, and thus became immanent within it. This, however, does not mean that he lost his transcendence. He himself still does not have location or extension, but is present and active everywhere within the universe. Nor does he have location or extension in time, although he is related to all of time. He knows what time it currently is at any point in the space-time universe. Does this mean that there is sequence and succession within him? The usual conclusion is that if he knows what time it is, there must be succession within his experience and he therefore is temporal. That, however, assumes that the existence and experience of God is of just the same nature as ours. That does not necessarily follow. This seems to extrapolate from the experience of time here, to a time that is on a different timeline, but nonetheless resembles physical time in requiring succession, though not measurable or demarcatable time. Whether there is such a time is something we cannot determine, but may simply have to confess that we are here in the presence of mystery. To argue otherwise requires the assumption of a rather univocal relationship between God and us.”⁶ The following points highlight the issues:

- “To say that God cannot act in time without being limited by time is the same as saying that He cannot act in space without being limited by it.
- “To say that if God is timeless then time is an illusion is the same as saying that if God is spaceless then space is an illusion.
- “To say that if God is timeless He cannot know the categories of time is the same as saying that if God is spaceless, He cannot know the categories of space.
- “To say that since the Bible uses metaphors of time such as “past,” “present,” and “future” and such words as “foreknowledge,” that God is limited by time is the same as saying that because the Bible uses metaphors of space such as “up,” “down,” “here,” and “there” as in “God came down,” that He is limited by space.
- “To say that God cannot hear our prayers unless He is limited by time is to say that He cannot hear our prayers unless He is limited by space.
- “To say that unless God is “in” time like man, man has a greater knowledge than God, is to say that unless He is “in” space like man, man has a greater knowledge than God.”⁷

CONCLUSION: The great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote of God’s eternity by saying, “eternity is identical with God’s essence; hence, it implies a fullness of essence. Not only is God eternal, but he is even ‘his own eternity.’ We do not have true analogy of God’s eternity in the case of the loafer, who wastes his time in idleness so that the days do not go but creep; nor in the case of the man who is confronted with imminent peril, or overwhelmed with sudden grief, so that the minutes seem like hours; but we have an analogy of God’s eternity in the abundant and exuberant life of a cheerful laborer, who never even considers time, and whose days and hours speed by. From this point of view, there is truth in the saying that in hell there is no eternity but only time, and that the more a creature resembles God and becomes God’s image, so much the more will he be victorious over the imperfections of time, and approach eternity. Hence, God’s eternity does not exist in the abstract: it is not separate from time, but is present and immanent in every moment of time. There is, indeed, an essential distinction between eternity and time; but there is also analogy and resemblance, so that the former can immanent in and exert influence upon the latter. Time is the concomitant of created existence; it has no origin in itself; eternal time in the sense of time without beginning is inconceivable. God, the eternal, is the only, absolute cause of time. In and by itself, moreover, time is not able to exist or to endure: it is a continuous becoming, and must needs rest in an immutable essence. It is God who, by virtue of his everlasting power, bears the time, both in its entirety and in its separate moments. In every second the pulsation of his eternity is felt. God stands in a definite relation to time: with his eternity he fills time; also for him time is objective; by virtue of his eternal consciousness he

knows time in its eternity and in the succession of all its moments. The fact that time is objective for him does not make him temporal, however. He never becomes *subject* to time, measure, number: he remains eternal, and inhabits eternity. But he uses time as a means for the manifestation of his eternal thoughts and excellencies; he makes time subservient to eternity, and thereby proves himself to be the *King of eternity*, 4r55r I Tim. 1:17.”⁸ “The eternity of God has practical implications. ‘As the eternity of God is the ground of all religion, so the eternity of Christ is the ground of the Christian religion,’ says Charnock. He explains: ‘As God is infinite, he hath right to a boundless service; as he is eternal he hath right to a perpetual service.’ Baxter applies the doctrine of God’s eternity brilliantly. Because God is eternal, he says, our minds should be drawn away from the transitory and temporal to the enduring and eternal. Unlike the beasts, we were not made merely for the present, physical, material world. Our souls were made for the eternal God, and our happiness is to be found nowhere else but in him.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1993), p. 53.

² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bk. 1, Ch. 2. Sec. 3).

³ J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (Macmillan, 1961), p. 15.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology I* (Eerdmans, 1958), p. 367.

⁵ Reymond does qualify this by later adding, “On the other hand, the Christian should not endorse, without careful qualification, the idea that time is an aspect of God’s eternity. It all depends on how time is defined. For example, if time be thought of as ‘the *objective* succession of moments existing apart from minds’ and applied to God’s being, it would suggest that God’s being would indeed be undergoing an ‘aging process.’ Also, something independent of God (that is, time itself) would seem to be moving history forward, and thus a shadow is cast upon God’s sovereign lordship over time and history.” P. 176.

⁶ This section is taken from Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Baker, 1998), pp. 16-18.

⁷ Erickson, *op. cit.* p. 276.

⁸ H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1979), p. 156.

⁹ Terry L. Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God* (Banner of Truth, 2019), p. 70.