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# APPLYING THE SCRIPTURES

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Papers From ICBI Summit III

Kenneth S. Kantzer

Editor

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# CONTENTS

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<i>About the Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xv
<b>1. THE LIVING GOD</b>	<b>1</b>
ROBERT D. PREUS	
Response: Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.	19
Response: Bruce K. Waltke	22
<b>2. THE SAVIOR AND HIS WORK</b>	<b>29</b>
ROGER R. NICOLE	
Response: William C. Weinrich	36
Response: Ralph D. Winter	44
<b>3. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND HIS WORK</b>	<b>51</b>
JAMES I. PACKER	
Response: James D. Brown	77
Response: Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.	83
Response: Gordon MacDonald	90
<b>4. THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION</b>	<b>97</b>
EDMUND P. CLOWNEY	
Response: Eugene W. Bunkowske	123
Response: Earl D. Radmacher	131
<b>5. SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE</b>	<b>139</b>
NORMAN L. GEISLER	
Response: Robert T. Jensen	161
Response: C. Everett Koop	167
Response: Curtis J. Young	175
<b>6. MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY</b>	<b>187</b>
WILLIAM AND MARY PRIDE	
Response: Paul E. Steele	201
Response: Michael D. Warner	210

<b>7. DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE</b>	<b>219</b>
WILLIAM A. HETH	
Response: Harold W. Hoehner	240
Response: Ray C. Stedman	247
<b>8. SEXUAL DEVIATIONS</b>	<b>253</b>
JOHN WHITE	
Response: Lawrence J. Crabb	265
Response: Earl D. Wilson	271
<b>9. THE STATE UNDER GOD</b>	<b>277</b>
CHARLES W. COLSON	
Response: John W. Whitehead	291
Response: Kenneth S. Kantzer	295
<b>10. LAW AND JUSTICE</b>	<b>299</b>
JOHN WARWICK MONTGOMERY	
Response: Gleason L. Archer	315
Response: William N. Garrison	322
<b>11. DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS</b>	<b>333</b>
GRETCHEN GAEBELEIN HULL	
Response: Anthony T. Evans	352
Response: Michael E. Haynes	356
<b>12. WAR</b>	<b>361</b>
KURT E. MARQUART	
Response: S. Craig Glickman	377
Response: Wallace E. Johnson	385
<b>13. ECONOMICS</b>	<b>389</b>
RONALD H. NASH	
Response: David W. Breese	407
Response: Herbert Schlossberg	415
<b>14. WORK AND LEISURE</b>	<b>421</b>
WALTER A. HENRICHSEN	
Response: W. David Beck	437
Response: Frederic R. Schatz	442

<b>15. WEALTH AND POVERTY</b>	<b>453</b>
JOHN M. PERKINS	
Response: Ted W. Engstrom	<b>460</b>
Response: Jay Alan Sekulow	<b>466</b>
<b>16. STEWARDSHIP OF THE ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>473</b>
CARL F. H. HENRY	
Response: John W. Klotz	<b>489</b>
Response: Loren Wilkinson	<b>497</b>
<b>17. GOD AND HISTORY</b>	<b>503</b>
JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE	

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# THE LIVING GOD

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Robert D. Preus

## I. INTRODUCTION

All of Scripture is theology—that is, language or talk about God. Whether we are talking about the Trinity, as I propose to do in this chapter; or about justification by grace; the Lord's Supper; eternal life; or the life of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, we are always and preeminently talking about God. Please bear this fact in mind as you read this chapter, for there are many important and essential topics we cannot discuss in this chapter, and so even our treatment on the subject of "The Living God" will seem—and will be—inadequate and incomplete. In this chapter we will discuss and attempt to answer three basic questions about God: (1) How do we know him? (2) What is he like? and (3) Who is he? Our answers to these questions will serve as an introduction and basis to everything else that can be said about God in later chapters, for everything discussed will be theological.

Another word of introduction: Our entire discussion will be on the basis of Scripture. This procedure is based on the principle that God is a living and speaking God, that he has made himself known to fallen mankind in various ways—through prophets and Old Testament Scriptures before the advent of his Son (Heb. 1:1) and through the apostolic Scripture of the New Testament after the death and resurrection of Christ.

## II. HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

To know God means not merely to know things about him—that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that he is righteous, almighty, wise, good, and loving—important and fundamental as

such knowledge is. According to Scripture, our knowledge of God is similar to our knowledge by acquaintance. It is a knowledge of the heart which results in love (Deut. 6:13). Such knowledge is not merely factual but involves a relationship, a walking with God in communion (Mic. 6:8). It is personal and intimate like our knowledge of a dear friend, and it affects our lives. Where there is no knowledge of God there is neither truth nor mercy (Hos. 4:1), neither obedience nor sacrifice to him (Matt. 9:13). "I know whom I have believed," Saint Paul says, "and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim. 1:12 KJV; cf. Rom. 8:38). Here we see that knowing God always involves personal trust and confidence. Christ knows his sheep, and his sheep know him (John 10:14). When Peter denies Christ and says, "I know him not" (Luke 22:57 KJV), he cuts himself off from God and his grace and loses everything. When Jesus says, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3 KJV), he declares that salvation and life eternal are the results of knowing God and what he in his grace has done for sinners (cf. 20:31; 1 Tim. 1:15). The basic theme of the Old Testament is that one knows God only when one recognizes his redemptive activity. Philip Melancthon echoes this truth when he says, "To know Christ is to know His benefits."<sup>1</sup>

Modern existential theology and neoorthodoxy (Martin Buber, Søren Kierkegaard, Emil Brunner, John Baillie, et al.) have emphasized the personal, experiential, and relational aspect of our knowledge of God to the virtual exclusion of revealed facts and information about God and what he has done to save us. They tend to ignore, pooh-pooh, and deny the historicity of the mighty acts of God and the redemptive acts of Jesus as well as the pure doctrine of the biblical gospel which recounts these acts and interprets them for us. This neomysticism and enthusiasm are not only contrary to every page of the Bible, which gives us facts and information about God, but are nonsensical. How can one know God without knowing anything about God?

In the Scriptures the existence of God is never questioned. The prophets and apostles and the saints of the Old and New Testaments take the existence and power of God for granted. They may deny God, defy him, and rebel against him, but they do not question his existence. When the house of Israel and of Judah dealt treacherously against the Lord, and the prophet says, "They have belied the Lord, and said, 'It is not he [literally, he is not]; neither shall any evil come upon us,'" they have not denied God's existence but have become *practical* atheists, i.e., living as though there were no God, not bothering about him or his commands (Jer. 5:12; cf. Ps. 14:1).

According to Scripture, the knowledge of God is everywhere.

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Ps. 19:1 kjv). The glory and power of God are in nature and in history to be seen by all (Ps. 8:29; Isa. 40; Jer. 10). But only God's people know him and worship him aright. In a sense, even sin proclaims God, for sin is, above all, rebellion against God. The polemics in the Old and New Testament are directed in favor of monotheism, the superiority of Christianity over other religions, and the pure doctrine of the gospel.

It must go without saying that there is no speculation in the Bible about the origin or development of God, although this was quite common in ancient heathen religions. God does not evolve or emerge from something. The Bible does not give us a "history" of Yahweh. He does not change or develop as Alfred North Whitehead and modern process theologians would have us believe. Neither is God a god among many as in modern Buddhism and Mormonism. He is always portrayed in Scripture as the eternal and unchangeable God and Lord of all.

How, then, do we know God? The ready answer of Scripture is that we do not know him by our ratiocinations and investigations of his essence and attributes; rather he reveals himself to us. How does he do this? In two ways. First, through the natural course of his created order (nature) and of human events (history); and second, through special acts of revelation.

God's creation bespeaks the goodness and wisdom of God (Job 38:41; Ps. 19:1). The mountains, sea, and waves are witness to the power and majesty of God; the seasons testify to his goodness (Ps. 65). His revelation in nature as a creator God who is personal and providential is in contrast to the idols of the heathens and the false gods of deists and the philosophers (Isa. 40; Jer. 10:11-15). This "natural knowledge" of God is very clearly addressed by Paul in Romans 1:19-20: "Because that which is known [knowable] of God is manifest in [to] them; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse" (ASV). Paul tells us here that "the things that are made" give evidence to all that there is a God who is highly exalted above the world and time, an eternal God who has created the ends of the earth (cf. Isa. 40). The evidence is so clear that anyone may "see"—that is, know—that there is an invisible God who is all powerful and has created this visible order. But from this created order anyone can also know of God's divinity; his Godhead; his incomprehensible, incomparable, and glorious nature—what Luke calls the "majesty" or mighty power of God when he describes Jesus' divine healing miracles (Luke 9:43). He who does not recognize all this is "without excuse"; for it is there to be known.



But all the knowledge that the unconverted sinner can gain from God's creation and his providence in nature and human events can never save a person. In nature is revealed God's power and majesty and wisdom, even benevolence, but not his love that saves lost and condemned sinners and grants them eternal life. Our old theologians used to say that God's revelation in nature can bring us to a knowledge that there is a God with magnificent attributes but not of who God is—namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, triune in his very essence, who is a gracious Savior, God, and Lord. That is revealed only in the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul says (Rom. 1:17). And even the godhead, majesty, and wrath revealed from heaven man persistently and always distorts (Rom. 1:18, 21ff.). All heathen and unbelievers, according to Scripture, may well know God in the sense that they have an awareness of his existence and presence and power. But, at the same time, they do not know him (Gal. 4:8; 1 Thess. 4:8)—not in the sense that they have an absolute ignorance of him as Karl Barth says but in the sense that they are without him. Paul calls them *atheoi*: atheists in the practical sense of having no God (Eph. 2:12).

But if man cannot know God from the created order and from his own futile searchings after the Deity (1 Cor. 1:21), how can he know him, who he is and what he is really like? We know him only when we are known by him, Paul says (Gal. 4:9), when he chooses to disclose himself to us not generally (as in nature) but specifically and specially in his Son and through his gospel Word, which today comes to us in the sacred Scriptures. Knowledge of salvation is only through Christ and the gospel (John 1:18; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:17; cf. also John 3:18, 36).

It is important for us to emphasize this basic fact today because it goes against the hubris of our fallen sinful nature and our *Zeitgeist*. Today in our Western world our primary concern, as we seek to follow ancient Greek thought, is to understand, explain, and comprehend reality around us (including God), and this presumably for practical purposes, if there are any. Coupled with this concern is the desire to control environment and to escape the frustration of not understanding nature and everything about us. Such an attitude and approach to life is based on the assumption that the principles of the universe and of all reality can be grasped by the human intellect. In the area of modern science such a procedure has proved to be very fruitful. But where God and religion are concerned, such an attitude turns man in the wrong direction. For God cannot be found, analyzed, and understood by the speculative mind of finite and sinful man. He is simply not the object of speculation. And no speculation from Plato to Whitehead has produced any concept of God even approaching reality, the reality made so clear to all in God's own Word, that God is not merely some sort of numen or pancreator or

"ground of being." No speculation can develop the notion that God is a loving, personal creator God, Maker and Sustainer of "all things visible and invisible," a redeemer God, "begotten of his Father before all worlds . . . who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate"; and that he is a comforter and sanctifier who is the Lord and Giver of life and thus creates and sustains Christ's church on earth. Only the revelation in Scripture shows us the true God, God as he really is and as he has really declared himself in Christ, a Savior God.

In the Scriptures the knowledge of God and the knowledge of salvation are inextricably linked. And who brings us salvation? Jesus. The priest Zacharias sings by inspiration that Jesus brings "the knowledge of salvation" to God's people by procuring the remission of sins (Luke 1:77). Peter says that we grow in grace when we grow in the knowledge of our *Savior* Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). According to the apostle Paul, to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (of God) are inseparable, and this is all because our Mediator, the God-man Jesus Christ, gave himself as a ransom for us (1 Tim. 2:4-6).

To know our Savior Christ, therefore, is to have salvation and to know God (Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:8, 10; 1 John 4:9; 5:20); and there is no other way to know God. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son [better texts say "God"], which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18 KJV). Just prior to this text John has spoken of the Incarnation (v. 14) and said that divine grace and truth are gained only through Christ. No man can see God and live. Yet the Son declares that God makes him known to all who know and believe in the Son. So Jesus can say that one who has seen him, the incarnate Son, has seen the Father (John 14:9). In fact, he can assure believers in him of eternal life because he and the Father are one in essence (John 10:30) and because he and the Father work in intimate union as he carries out the works of salvation (John 10:38). In Hebrews we are told that Jesus is the "very image of [God's] substance" (Heb. 1:3 ASV), and Saint Paul says that the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" is revealed "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6 KJV). Thus, when the evangelist says that the Son, Jesus, "is" (ever existing) in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18), he is speaking of a direct seeing, or knowledge, of God which we have through Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God *himself*. Jesus is not a mere reflection of God. Christ witnesses of the Deity, he declares God to us because he *is* God. We have a knowledge of God and eternal life only when we know Christ (1 John 5:20).<sup>2</sup>

But how do we know Christ? Not by a heroic act of faith, leaping blindly into the dark. Not by historic research. Certainly

we cannot turn back the clock and walk with him and talk with him as the disciples did. We know him and receive his grace through his Word, the informative and powerful gospel word of Scripture. And this written word of the Old Testament which Christ fulfilled (Matt. 5:17ff.; John 5:39) and of the New Testament which he guaranteed by the gift of the Holy Spirit to his apostles (John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13), this revelatory word, affords *knowledge*, knowledge of God, divinely revealed information about God.

Promoters of neoorthodoxy (Karl Barth, Andrew Nygren, John Baillie, Emil Brunner, et al.) deny that Scripture provides such cognitive knowledge about God: pure doctrine does not exist, according to these theologians. And scholars of modern logical positivism and its many theological satellites posit that all theology—language about God in Scripture or elsewhere—is nonsense, neither true nor false, incapable of conveying information. Thus all theological assertions are outlawed by definition and are reduced to mere “metaphysical” or aesthetic or emotive utterances like “Ouch!” or “Oh!” or “Look!” which tell us only about ourselves, not about God. We do not have time to refute these two ideologies in this short chapter.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say that such viewpoints spring from the matrix of secular materialism. And whether these ideologists believe in a transcendent God or in no God, they operate from the principle, *finitum non est capax infiniti*, the finite is not capable of conveying or containing the infinite, whether we are speaking of the human Jesus or the human Scriptures.

### III. WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

The Bible speaks less about the essence and attributes of God than about his works in history and in the lives of believers. One simply cannot get at the essence of God by speculation or by depicting him in stone or wood, which was strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. God is holy and transcendent. He is the living God who cannot be caught by static images or conceptions. The emphasis throughout Scripture upon the actions of God, upon his intervention in history and his dealings with people, shows us that he is a living God. He fights for them and guides them (1 Sam. 17:26, 36); he loves his people and comforts them, and when they thirst after him he fills them (Ps. 42:3) and they find rest in him (Ps. 84:3; Matt. 11:28–29). The living God is utterly dependable.

The living God is Author and Sustainer of all life: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It is significant that in the New Testament Christ is called life and is the source of all life and all that is (John 1:1–2; Col. 15:17), thus showing that he is God. A central motif of Scripture is that God is the origin of life

and all life springs from him (Ps. 36:9). All life is a gift from him (Ps. 104), and this is because God himself is living. Life, activity, *presence for us* are fundamental to God's nature; he is not some pantheistic "ground of being." As the living God he is *personally* concerned about the world and his people (Ps. 18:47; Jer. 10:9-10; Hos. 1:10).

The living God is a *personal* God. The personal nature of God is brought out in many ways. Second Corinthians 4:6 speaks of the "face" of Jesus Christ—that is, his personality. We pray to God, and he answers. We trust him as we trust a person. We say "thou" to him and he to us. Throughout Scripture our relationship with him is always personal. God has a will; he makes decisions. All his actions—all his actions—toward us are personal (see 1 Cor. 1). His grace and love and goodness, as well as his wrath and judgment, are personal actions (Rom. 2:4; 11:22; Titus 3:4). And when Scripture describes God as wise and true and good (John 3:33; Rom. 2:4; 16:27), it ascribes eminently personal attributes to God. Stauffer says, "Love is not the essence of deity, but rather the personal God is love in all His will and work, and this expressly in the work of Christ (John 3:16)."<sup>4</sup>

Biblical anthropomorphisms (ascribing human parts to God) and anthropopathisms (ascribing human affections or feelings or reactions to God) emphasize in a striking way his personal nature. In fact, the very transcendence of God is expressed by some anthropomorphisms, thus showing that even though God is one who is personally related to man, nevertheless, there is no common measure between God and man (Num. 23:19; Isa. 43:13; 45:12, 23; Hos. 11:9). The anthropomorphisms bring out the uniqueness of God and at the same time tell us about him cognitively. They are not mere naïve thoughts of primitive people concerning God but are God's own revealed descriptions of himself and his actions in human terms which finite and sinful men can understand. These and other figures of speech must be taken therefore in all seriousness, for they tell of God as he really is and as he really acts.

The personal nature of God is brought out in Scripture also by the intimate relationship and dealings of God with man. This personal fellowship is expressed often by the verb "walk" in Scripture (Mic. 6:8). Adam walked with God in the Garden (Gen. 3:8). Enoch walked with God (Gen. 5:24). This means that Adam and Enoch had intimate communion with him; no estrangement or disrupting factors broke the fellowship. A different but related word is used by Jesus and the New Testament, the word "love" which expresses the intimate relationship of husband and wife. Jesus says, "If a man love me, he will keep [cling to] my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode [dwelling place] with him" (John 14:23 kjv; cf.

John 3:16; Eph. 5:25; 1 John 4:7–21). Love is a personal act. The God who loves our fallen race is a personal God.

God's intimate personal association with men is seen also in the term "know" in Scripture. "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:14 *KJV*; cf. 10:27; 2 Tim. 2:19). Jesus knows us with the same intimacy that he knows the Father and the Father knows him (John 10:14–15a). Such personal knowledge and love (communion) between God and man is unique to the Christian religion (Isa. 52:6; Jer. 31:1ff., 31ff.; Hos. 2:23; John 17:3).

Still another attribute and activity ascribed to God tells of his personal relationship with mankind: his presence among us. We are speaking here not so much of his immensity, his repletive presence whereby he fills and sustains and upholds all things, as of his gracious personal presence. God's repletive omnipresence (2 Chron. 2:6; Ps. 113:4–7; Prov. 15:3; Jer. 23:24) declares clearly that he is a personal God but primarily in terms of his sovereignty, his utter transcendence, and his awesome majesty and wrath. It is a preachment of Law in the main. We are thinking more of God's gracious and loving presence with believers (Isa. 57:15), his evangelical presence, the presence which is marked by his promises to come to us who call upon him for help and to save us, by the promises of Jesus that he will be with us, and by his promises of the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us (Pss. 23:4; 91:14–16; 145:18–19; Isa. 43:1–7; Matt. 18:10, 20; 28:20; John 14:23, 25–26; 15:26; 16:13–14). This personal presence of God in and with believers is not some vague ubiquity, "thereness," but a dynamic, gracious, real presence of our God himself in his very essence, analogous to an eternal marriage (Hos. 2:19) or to a vine giving life to branches (John 15:1) or to a head and a body (Eph. 5:23). God himself, not just his gifts, lives and is in the believer in a union whereby we become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The Holy Spirit dwells in all believers in Christ, not merely figuratively through his gifts, but personally (1 Cor. 3:16–17). And this means that the very Godhead dwells in believers in what our church fathers have called a mystical union with all the fullness of his wisdom, holiness, power, and other divine gifts (Eph. 3:18).

The personal God who is present for us through the atoning work of Christ and present in us through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is an omniscient God. He has a perfect knowledge of his creatures and of his people. He knows perfectly our weaknesses, our needs, and the secrets of our hearts (Ps. 44:21). No desire for peace or forgiveness, no groaning is hidden from him (Ps. 38:9). This knowledge is both personal and intimate, and this is of great comfort to us who trust in him (Ps. 103:14; Matt. 6:32; 10:30; 1 John 3:20).

Every attribute and action ascribed to God in Scripture testifies that our God is personal. This is what God is truly like. God is as he has acted and revealed himself. We know him by his works. Werner Elert says, "The question to what degree God is personality or how His personality as such is to be described can be answered in no other way than through the consideration of His works."<sup>5</sup>

A fundamental fact of God's revelation of himself in Scripture is that he, the Lord, is one and undivided in essence. A correlate of this fundamental truth is the biblical teaching of the uniqueness of God, that he alone is God and there are no other gods besides him. The one truth involves the other. This unity and unicity of God (monotheism) is the foundation stone of the Christian religion. From the time of our first parents in the Garden, God has always revealed himself as one God who is utterly unique. The unity of God is expressed by the great schema of the Israelites' morning and evening prayer, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, is one LORD . . ." (Deut. 6:4ff. KJV). And this oneness of God demands that we worship him in our whole heart and being. For the schema goes on to say: "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (v. 5 KJV). The unity of God implies and demands unity of worship and doctrine. He cannot be worshiped in one way at one place and in another way at another place. God cannot be divided (John 4:24).

That God is one and cannot be divided means that he is absolute unity, free from all composition, not consisting of parts. When Jesus says he comes from God and is God, he does not deny or vitiate the unity of God. Schlatter says, "The early Christian monotheism is not threatened by the Christology of the New Testament, but made secure."<sup>6</sup> Christ himself speaks about only one God. He repeats the schema (Mark 12:29, 32) and remarks that there "is none good but one, that is, God" (Mark 10:18 KJV; cf. John 4; 1 Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:5-6; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2:5; 6:15-16), and this even though he claimed to be one with God the Father (John 10:30; 17:21).

What about the fact that the Scriptures call the Son and the Holy Spirit God as well as the Father (e.g., Isa. 9:6; 11:2ff.; 61:1; Jer. 23:6; Matt. 12:28; John 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:15; Titus 3:5)? We can only reply that there can be no contradiction here but rather a mystery which transcends our understanding. We must simply hold to all the revealed data made known to us in Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

Neither does the unity of God conflict with the many, sometimes seemingly contradictory attributes and actions Scripture ascribes to God, such as his wrath and his love, his judgment and his grace, his word of law and his word of gospel. Our infinite and transcendent God cannot be caught within the categories of

our finite and fallen reason. Our minds cannot set limits to his being and works (Isa. 40:18ff.; Rom. 11:33); God cannot be defined.

Like the unity of God, monotheism is a fundamental premise of all biblical theology. There is no suggestion anywhere in Scripture of gods besides the one true God; throughout the history of God's people recorded in the Pentateuch Yahweh reveals himself as the only God. The first commandment of the Decalogue forbids worshiping or recognizing other gods (Exod. 20:2-3); and the punishment is imposed: "He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed" (22:20 KJV). The implication of some scholars that such prohibitions indicate monolatrous or henotheistic belief on the part of Moses is untenable. The first commandment indicates not the existence but the nonexistence of other gods. Only the Lord is the *living* God; the very name Yahweh is taken from the word "to be, to exist." When in Exodus 2:4 graven images are forbidden, no one would assume that Scripture thereby attributes divine existence to graven images. No, only the Lord is God, and "there is none else beside him" (Deut. 4:35 KJV, 39; 32:39); all idols are "things of naught, worthless gods" (Lev. 19:4; 26:1), no gods at all, "vanities," "nothing," "wind" (1 Kings 16:13; Isa. 41:29; Jer. 8:19 KJV). God is transcendent, and his transcendence is his uniqueness (Isa. 40:18; 45:5-6).<sup>8</sup>

All the attributes ascribed to God in the biblical revelation tell us what God is like. He is holy, separated from all that is not God (Isa. 1, 6, 10, 40, 41, 43, 45, 48ff.). Holiness denotes God's radiance and purity, his absolute moral perfection in every direction (Job 15:15; Isa. 1:4; Luke 5:8). It denotes his absolute transcendence and otherness (Hos. 11:9). Therefore his actions are a wonder to behold (Isa. 29:14). Holiness denotes God's absolute power; what he does, only he can do (Isa. 40:25-27; 41:1ff.). But God's holiness also marks his goodness, mercy, grace (Exod. 15:11; 1 Sam. 2:2), and glory.

God's glory is the manifestation of his holiness, of his absolute majesty (Exod. 33:18). And this glory fills men's hearts with wonder, fear, and confusion (Isa. 6:5; Luke 5:8); but also with joy, peace, and anticipation (Isa. 6:5; Luke 2:8, 14; 5:8; cf. also Exod. 3; John 1:14; Eph. 1:17-18; 1 Peter 1:17). The Holy One of Israel is the Redeemer, the Savior (Heb. *goel*) of Israel (Isa. 41:14; 43:3, 14; 49:7; 54:5), and his holiness or his "holy name" "always has its basis in His saving work."<sup>9</sup> When Jesus is called Savior or Redeemer in Scripture, when he is called "the holy one of God" (Luke 1:35; John 6:69; Acts 4:27, 30), when he is said to manifest his glory (John 1:14), he himself is declared to be God (cf. Isa. 42:8). It is significant that the glory of God in the New Testament is always associated with Christ, the man (John 1:14), either in his

birth (Luke 2:9), his activities (John 2:11), his transfiguration, his ascension, or even his death (John 16-17).

Like his holiness, omnipresence, and knowledge which we have spoken of before, God's omnipotence embraces the whole spectrum of God's attributes and actions and reveals to us what kind of God he is, a living and personal God, a free God who does what he pleases and who can do anything (Gen. 18:14; Ps. 115:3; Jer. 32:17; Matt. 3:9). God's power embraces his justice, his wrath against sin, his control of all things, his benevolence, and his saving grace (Eph. 1:19), even his eternity. His omnipotence may well frighten us because of our sins, but it also assures us that he is our God and that he is able to care for us in every way and to save us (Isa. 50:2-3; Rom. 8:32ff.; Eph. 1:18f.; 3:20ff.; cf. also Gen. 15:1; 17:1).

God's power is eternal, and his eternity is omnipotent. There is an inextricable nexus between all the attributes of God. All the attributes of God, however we might classify them, ascribed in Scripture to God and his works are really one with the divine essence, for God is absolutely one and undivided, as we have seen. There can be no confusion or contradiction between the different attributes and works of God. As Scripture tells us that he is just, transcendent, good, righteous, immutable, truthful, omniscient in himself and in all his works and ways, it tells us the truth about God and what he is really like.

## IV. WHO IS GOD?

### A. The Trinity

As we have searched the Scriptures to learn what God is like, we have also learned his identity, who he is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is to say, he who has revealed himself to be Creator of all things and is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from eternity is called and is God; he who existed with God from eternity and has revealed himself to be the only begotten Son of God and Savior of the world is called and is God. He who revealed himself to be the Spirit of God proceeding of eternity from the essence of God, who came upon the Virgin Mary so that she became pregnant with the Son of the Highest, who anointed the Son of God to his ministry of redemption, and who calls, gathers, and enlightens Christ's church on earth through the Word of God is called and is God.

Here we stand on holy ground. We are confronted with the divine mystery of the Holy Trinity. The absolute unity of the divine essence is affirmed everywhere in Scripture, yet he is three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And these identifying names are never used in Scripture metaphorically, never



used to denote a mere attribute or activity or emanation of God or a mere relation or force or mode of divine being. They denote always specific, concrete, real, distinct, identifiable, individual, conscious persons.

The term *person* (Greek *hypostasis*, Latin *persona*) as it was used in the early church and to this very day by Christians is not explicitly found in the Old or New Testaments. But the idea which Christians have attempted to convey by this term, which was used and defined to combat misunderstanding and heresy, is certainly biblical.

According to the Augsburg Confession, the Magna Charta of the Reformation, the three persons of the Godhead are "of the same essence and power, who also are co-eternal, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. And the term 'person' they [the Reformers] use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part of quality in another, but that which subsists of itself."<sup>10</sup> This is what the church fathers taught in accordance with Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

And this is precisely the unsophisticated and clear teaching of Scripture. Everywhere in the Old and New Testaments where the Father or Christ, the Son, or the Holy Spirit is spoken of individually, a conscious, real, individual, and distinct person is referred to, a person who creates, who wills, who loves, who judges, who has compassion, who comforts, who inspires prophets, etc. This is true also when one person of the Godhead is spoken of in Scripture in relation to another; a relationship of persons is always evidenced. The personal relationship and thus the personal characteristics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been revealed most concretely in the ministry of Jesus, God's only Son. The Father and the Holy Spirit are intimately and personally involved in his incarnation, conception, and birth (Matt. 1:18-24; Luke 1:26-35), in his baptism and anointment into his redemptive ministry (Matt. 3:13-17; cf. Isa. 61:1-3; Matt. 12:18ff.; 4:1ff.; cf. Gen. 3:16), in his transfiguration (Matt. 17:8) and crucifixion. Jesus obeys (a personal act) the will of the Father; he promises and sends (personal acts) the Spirit. Throughout Scripture only masculine personal pronouns are used to denote Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The personal nature of Father, Son, and Spirit are most emphatically evidenced in Jesus' discourses in John 14-16. He urges his disciples to believe in the Father and in him. If we know him, we know the Father. If we have seen him, we have seen the Father. He is in the Father, and the Father is in him—in him in the most unique and divine communion and interpenetration (what the Greek fathers called *perichoresis*) but without any confusion of the identity of the persons. The Father sends another Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who abides with the disciples and with his church. The world does not see him or know him, but we know

him. He is loved by all who love the Father. The Father sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name. Jesus, too, sends the Comforter from the Father, and the Comforter testifies of him. The Comforter comes and testifies and leads us into all truth. Now, it is persons—individual, intelligent centers of consciousness, "I[s]," "you[s]," "he[s]"—who are spoken of in this discourse of our Lord, not principles, relationships, events, attributes, or modes of being.

Just as Scripture witnesses to the fact that the names, activities, and attributes ascribed to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicate that each is a true and individual person, so the testimony of Scripture teaches that each of the three persons is true God, that the Son and the Holy Spirit possess the fullness of the deity with the Father. Divine names are ascribed to Christ, the Son, throughout the Old Testament (*Yahweh* [Ps. 68:17; Isa. 6:1; Jer. 23:6; Hos. 1:7; Zech. 2:8ff.], *Adonai* [Ps. 110:1; Mal. 3:1], *El* [Ps. 95:7; Isa. 7:14; 9:6; 35:4–6]). In the New Testament he is called both Lord and God in the absolute sense without any limitations (John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2:8; 8:6; Col. 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:15; 6:14–16; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 1 John 5:20). To him is ascribed the creation of all things (Col. 1:14–16). His work of redemption and everything pertaining to it is a work that only Almighty God can carry out. He is eternal with God (John 1:1) and is called "the only begotten Son" (v. 18 *kjv*), or the only begotten God, of God. He possesses all the attributes of God, "for in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9 *kjv*). He is the effulgence of God's glory and the image of his substance (Heb. 1:3). Therefore he is to be worshiped and believed just as the Father is to be worshiped and believed (John 5:23; 6:29; 14:1; Rev. 4:11).

The deity of the Holy Spirit is also clear from the witness of Scripture. All personal characteristics ascribed to him in Scripture—that he proceeds from God, that he witnesses, that he gives life, that he comforts, regenerates, forgives, and saves—are characteristics and works of God alone. His very name "Spirit" as ascribed to him in Scripture suggests deity, and the common adjective "holy" is an essential attribute only of God. The gifts of the Spirit to the church—confession of Christ, prophecy, inspiration, tongues and the interpretation of tongues, faith, love, unity, hope, baptism, etc. (Rom. 12:6ff; 1 Cor. 12; Gal. 5:22–25; Eph. 4:3ff.) are all divine gifts, even as they are personal gifts. All that pertains to the Christian's spiritual existence has its origin in the Holy Spirit. There would be no church, no faith, no baptism, no forgiveness, no conferral of divine grace, and no enjoyment of salvation apart from the Holy Spirit and his work. That is why it is so important for us to believe that, as the Holy Spirit works, God is graciously and mightily at work with us and in us and for us,

just as it is utterly crucial for us to know and believe that Christ's work of redemption is nothing else but the work of God himself. Luther says:

For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ or believe on Him and have Him for our Lord, except as it is offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the gospel. The work is finished and accomplished; for Christ, by His suffering, death, resurrection, etc. has acquired and gained the treasure for us. But if the work remained concealed, so that no one knew of it, then it were in vain and lost. That this treasure therefore might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and apply it to us. Therefore sanctification is nothing else but bringing us to Christ to receive this good, to which, of ourselves, we could not attain.<sup>12</sup>

What Luther has just said is eminently biblical and of decisive importance. If Christ our Savior is not God, if the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier is not God, then there is no atonement, no salvation, no life after death, and no faith or hope for the Christian.

But is God really three divine persons, or does he only reveal himself to be so? Christian theologians have distinguished between the eternal works or inner relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Trinity and those works which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do in relation to creation and mankind. When we refer to the former—i.e., the Father begets his own Son from eternity, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and is identical with him and is Light of Light, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (Pss. 2:7; 96:6; 110:4; John 1:1, 9, 18; 3:16; 5:18; 8:29; 10:30; 12:40–41; 15:26; Rom. 8:32; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3)—we speak of the *immanent* Trinity. When we refer to the actions of the persons of the Godhead in relation to us, we commonly speak of the *economic* Trinity. The eternal intertrinitarian works of the Godhead are no less real than his external and sometimes historical works toward his fallen creation. Our one God is triune, three divine persons sharing the one divine essence, immanently as well as economically. "For," as Werner Elert says, "God cannot be anything else than what He has revealed Himself to be. If He has revealed Himself as three in one, then He is three in one."<sup>13</sup>

It is significant to note that throughout the history of doctrine when theologians have denied that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are persons, they have also lost the doctrine of the immanent Trinity just as surely as when they deny the deity of the three persons. But they have lost more than what they think is just a relic of antiquated medieval metaphysics: they have lost the economic Trinity as well; they have lost God's mighty acts or muddled them beyond recognition. No longer do these theolo-

gians believe in a creation of all things, a redemption of the human race, and a sanctification of God's own people, all carried out by the living God himself. And so they have lost God.

Who am I talking about here? Not just relationalistic or Romantic theologians and philosophers of the so-called European Enlightenment; not just Socinians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and modern Unitarians of recent generations who called themselves Modernists; not just *Ichtheologen* (Subjectivists) and classical liberals of the nineteenth century (Schleiermacher, Ritzsch, Harnack, et al.),<sup>14</sup> but also contemporary theologians from a veritable welter of ideologies and schools, such as process theology, existentialism, theology of hope, liberation theology, neoorthodoxy, neoliberalism, *ad nauseam*. By rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity as unevangelical or unintelligible or for some other reason, by distorting or trying to "rehabilitate" the biblical doctrine, or by ignoring the doctrine altogether, these theological leaders of our day have given up the gospel which can only be proclaimed in a Trinitarian matrix and setting.<sup>15</sup>

The doctrine of God—that is, the Trinity—so firmly based on Scripture, is *the* fundamental article of the Scriptures and of the Christian faith in the sense that all biblical theology ought to be grounded upon and subsumed under this one article which tells us everything we should know and believe about who God is and what he is like and what he has done.<sup>16</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity is necessary because it helps us to present the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and at the same time to maintain the monotheistic obligation which is every Christian's.<sup>17</sup> But the doctrine of the Trinity also forms the only possible theological context for presenting the gospel. For the gospel is nothing else than the proclamation of the external works of the economic Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Really, it is all summed up beautifully by Luther in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed in his *Large Catechism*.

In these three articles God Himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of His fatherly heart, His sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, He has given us His Son and His Holy Spirit, through whom He brings us to Himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from Him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.

These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or

false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what His attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of His love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Apology of Augsburg Confession*, 4:101.

<sup>2</sup> Luther says: "Scripture begins tenderly and leads us to Christ as a man, then to the Lord over all creatures and to a God. In this way I advance gently and learn to know God. But philosophy and worldly-wise people desired to begin at the top—and thereby they became fools" (WA 21:22). Cf. WA 1:362:

It suffices and avails no one to know God in His glory and majesty, unless he knows Him in the humility and ignominy of the cross. Thus when Philip, in the spirit of a "theology of glory" said, "Show us the Father" (John 14:8), Christ immediately restrained His wandering thought which sought God elsewhere and directed it to Himself, saying: "Philip, he that seeth me seeth my Father also." Therefore the true theology and knowledge of God is to be found in the crucified Christ.

<sup>3</sup> I have attempted to analyze and evaluate these opinions in *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 2:18–30.

<sup>4</sup> See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933–79), 3:111.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1956), p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> Adolf Schlater in *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 3:103.

<sup>7</sup> Christian theologians of all ages have struggled with this problem of whether the Trinity militates against the unity of God. John Gerhard says:

To the question whether the Trinity of Persons militates against the simplicity of God we reply in the following manner: 1. Different articles of faith are not to be opposed to each other. Both the simplicity [undivided unity] of the divine essence and the Trinity of the persons are set forth in the Word for our benefit. Hence we ought to accept both with obedience of faith. 2. We do not contend that the divine essence must be separated according to its actual existence. . . . But rather we affirm that the divine essence and three Persons of the Deity are in a most real and simple sense one. Therefore there is no composition [in God]. The personal characteristics [of the persons in the Godhead] do not multiply or compound the divine essence, since one and the same divine essence is in the Father unbegotten, in the Son begotten, and in the Holy Spirit as one who proceeds [from the Father and the Son].

Quoted in John William Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, ed. C. F. W. Walther (St. Louis: Concordia, 1879), 2:18.

<sup>8</sup> Among scholars who claim some allegiance to Scripture there have been three main opinions concerning the origin and evolution of monotheism. (1) Yahweh originally was one God among others; but he is not like others because he is superior to them. See Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur H. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), pp. 66ff. Henotheism verges into monotheism at the time of the so-called Second Isaiah.

(2) A more cautious view that is monotheism is implied at the time of Moses or even earlier; however, the uniqueness of Yahweh was not thought out theoretically until long after Moses. See Theodore Christian Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), pp. 175ff. (3) Full monotheism is taught throughout Scripture. God reveals himself originally to man as one and unique. This position, which is the doctrine we hold, is ably defended by Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, English ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1950), pp. 57ff. The reason even relatively conservative biblical scholars believe that there may be a trace of henotheism in Scripture is due to three factors: (1) They do not accept the biblical doctrine of revelation whereby God breaks in upon man's history and makes himself known as he really is. (2) They are committed to the theory that doctrine (cognitive information about God) is not revealed but evolves out of the treasures of the human heart. (3) They are committed to higher criticism, which has a propensity toward dating books of the Bible according to evolutionary hypothesis concerning the development of doctrine.

<sup>9</sup>August Pieper, "The Glory of the Lord," *Quartalschrift* (1955), p. 175.

<sup>10</sup>*Apology of Augsburg Confession*, 1:3-4.

<sup>11</sup>G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1956), pp. 161ff., *passim*. Melancthon, the author of the Augsburg Confession, like the medieval scholastic theologians and other Reformers, uses and elaborates on the definition of *persona* given by the philosopher Boethius, *naturae rationalis individua substantia*. See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Westminster: Newman, 1952), 2:102. This is the understanding that orthodox Christians have had as they apply the term "person" to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

<sup>12</sup>*Large Catechism*, 2:38-39.

<sup>13</sup>Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube*, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup>See Claude Welch, *In This Name, the Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952). With clarity, insight, and some pathos, Welch traces the understanding and treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity by leading theologians of the West through the nineteenth and twentieth century, including Karl Barth and Leonard Hodgson. No one has brought such a study up to date.

<sup>15</sup>It would require a large book to analyze and evaluate all the literature by unorthodox theologians of various traditions and stripes as they address themselves to the doctrine of the Trinity today. I offer two "Lutheran" examples that might serve to illustrate the utter confusion that reigns in Protestant and, I fear, also Roman Catholic circles. I mention first the so-called *Evangelical Catechism*, published in Germany (1979) by a number of prominent theologians and then revised for American consumption (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982). The significance of this little book, which was intended as a sort of modern rendition of Luther's *Large Catechism*, is marked by the fact that the volume was sent to every pastor and congregation of the American Lutheran Church. Yet this work of 399 pages does not even mention the doctrine of the Trinity or allude to it. So far does this highly touted theological piece, calculated to edify God's people, fail to come to grips with the biblical revelation of who God is.

Another more scholarly head-on discussion of the Trinity intended for a more sophisticated, elite audience, is presented by Robert Jenson in a book coedited with Carl E. Braaten entitled *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Jenson (p. 143), by a curious combination of the antimetaphysical notions of nineteenth-century liberalism, Hegelianism, positivistic linguistic analysis, and modern process theology, pokes fun repeatedly at the old Augustinian and creedal statements that God is one essence and three persons. The terms "communicate nothing whatsoever," Jenson avers. Dredging up a statement of Peter Lombard, of all people, and pushing the statement beyond its force, he proclaims the complete "bankruptcy of the Trinitarian meaning." With this kind of *tour de force* Jenson seems content to rest his case against the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. And what is Jenson's replacement for the biblical doctrine? "Truly, the Trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community"

(1:155). Jenson goes on, "This 'economic' Trinity is *eschatologically* God 'Himself,' an 'immanent' Trinity. And that assertion is no problem, for God is Himself only *eschatologically*, since He is Spirit." Here we see the pathetic results of a neologist who abandons the authority of Scripture and the clear categories of biblical language (person, tense, etc.) and thus the plain teachings of Scripture concerning who God is.

<sup>16</sup>This has been the procedure of great theologians through the centuries, such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others as they structured their theology on the basis of the Apostolic or Nicene Creed. Jacob in his *Theology of the Old Testament* works with the same pattern as he subsumes all Old Testament theology under the single treatment of God.

<sup>17</sup>Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube*, pp. 217ff.

<sup>18</sup>*Large Catechism*, 2:64-66.

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## A Response to The Living God

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Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

The threefold division of Dr. Robert Preus's discussion of the doctrine of God is most helpful. In catechetical fashion he has set out to answer three basic questions about God: (1) How do we know him? (2) What is he like? (3) Who is he? Each section has a distinctive emphasis which makes a unique contribution to the doctrine of God.

While carefully circumscribing any knowledge of God that could be called "natural theology" or such traditional apologetical evidences for God's existence as the historical, experiential, or philosophical arguments, Dr. Preus makes it clear that what he is after is the knowledge of the heart: a knowledge that involves a relationship with the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, triune in essence and the one revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though some may express disappointment over the fact that not enough attention has been given to the arguments such as those in Psalm 19 or Romans 1-2, this respondent is not especially disappointed, since the most that those apologetical arguments can establish is the case for the existence of the God of creation. But the God who revealed himself in the Scriptures and in our Lord Jesus Christ must still be sought by means of the gospel itself.

Accordingly, everything hangs on what we mean by the word "know." There is a great difference between a cognitive cerebral knowledge of God and a personal, believing commitment to him. When this distinction is observed, then the emphasis of Preus's disclaimers are all the more apparent.

The opposite problem is faced in existential systems of theology that play up the experiential and relational sides of the knowledge of God but deny the historical, factual, and objective



nature of the revealed truth of Scripture on the doctrine of God. This modern trajectory was also wisely resisted in this essay.

In answer to his second question, "What is God like?" Preus answers with a brief survey of God's attributes (he is living, personal, intimate, present, unique, holy, omnipotent, eternal), work (especially his work of atonement), and nature (his unity or unicity). The highlight of this section is his definition of what it means to be a personal living God and what it means that God is absolute unity. We are properly assured, of course, that when we say that "God is one and cannot be divided," it means that he is "free from all composition, not consisting of parts." But how does Preus put this together with the fact that there are three who are called God in Scripture? Preus assures us once again that there is no contradiction here; rather it is "a mystery which transcends our understanding."

I am sure that is all correct as far as it goes, but perhaps we would be well advised to exegete John 10:34-39 with its dual emphasis: I and my Father are *one* and the Father has *sent* me. This is where Augustine and Calvin rested their case on this issue, and we would be well advised to do no less.

The final section, "Who Is God?" was perhaps the most creative in its simple statement of extremely profound truths such as the Trinity. While the argument tended to emphasize more the historical confessions and philosophical distinctions (as it always has and to some degree must), it underscored the true individuality of all three persons as well as their interpenetration, so as to form the unity of the Godhead. Preus's stress on an immanent Trinity (the inner relations of the Trinity and their works from eternity) and an economic Trinity (the works each person of the Godhead does in relation to us) underscores the deity of each of the Trinity as well as the distinctive work Scripture ascribes to each.

Truly, the doctrine of God is "*the fundamental article of the Scriptures and of the Christian faith.*"

If there is anything lacking in this article, it is this: an identification of a major teaching passage (*sedes doctrinae*) in the Scripture for each of the major points made about God. What we call for here has not been done very frequently, if at all, in the history of theological development. But the time is long past when it should have been adopted as the only way to present Christian doctrines, especially for scholars and teachers who rightfully press the claims of *sola Scriptura* with its corollary of inerrancy.

What I mean is this: Prior to any discussion of a doctrine or any of its major constituent parts, the largest teaching block of biblical text ought to be identified and properly exegeted. The fortunes of systematic theology continue to dip lower each year even within the evangelical community of faith. This is not only

due to the demise of interest in system building in philosophy and the utter rejection of all metaphysics; it is also due to the tremendous upsurge in interest and our evangelical success in more consistent exegesis of the text in Scripture.

There is a whole new generation of younger scholars who become tremendously uneasy when theological argumentation proceeds by means of a definition substantiated by a string of phrases, clauses, or a random sentence quickly identified with an allusion to a chapter and a verse number. Whether the context truly supported the notion for which it was cited is usually left up to the imagination of the listener/reader. How can we avoid the charge of "proof-texting" if we do not pause to show that the basic idea we are urging does have a "home base," a "chair location" with the exact teaching for which we are wanting that text? Only after we have carefully exegeted that "teaching text" in its context can we be free to use the method of the "analogy of Scripture" and allude to other better-known contexts whose phrases and clauses establish the same truth.

Based on our high view of Scripture, then, I call for a whole new method of teaching dogma or doctrine in our seminaries, in our Bible studies, and from our pulpits. In setting forth the attributes of God, I would first identify the key teaching passages for each main proposition in my doctrine of God. For example, here are some chair teaching passages on the doctrine of God: God's incomparable greatness (Isa. 40:9–31); God's aseity and communication of revelation (44:24–28); God's attributes—his omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence (Ps. 139); God's unity and distinction of persons (John 10:27–39); etc.

After an exegesis and exposition of each of these texts or ones like them had been completed, then a survey of additional texts in the progress of revelation (biblical theology) could be the second step in building a doctrinal statement. This must be followed by a third level of study which investigated what the Spirit of God had helped the church through the centuries (history of church doctrine) to understand on this theme. The fourth and final step would ask our contemporary philosophical and practical questions which would help us apply this doctrine of God to our lives today.

We believe such a fourfold program of study would restore to the church a greater confidence in the authority of what was being said on each doctrine. It would be a natural corollary of our high view of Scripture and attract students to the presently faltering fortunes of the discipline of systematic theology or church dogma. We urge Christ's church to put into action this important implication of *sola Scriptura* for building doctrine and making what has already served the church well, even better, to the glory of our great God and coming King.

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# A Response to The Living God

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Dr. Robert D. Preus, after an introduction, divides his enlightening essay into three sections: "How Do We Know God?" "What Is God Like?" and "Who Is God?" I will follow his format.

## I. HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?

Our author rightly gives pride of place to the distinction between knowing about God and knowing God (pp. 1–2). In keeping with the intention of this summit, he incisively applies his insight. "A knowledge of the heart," Preus writes, "results in love." He adds, "Where there is no knowledge of God there is neither truth nor mercy (Hos. 4:1), neither obedience nor sacrifice to him" (Matt. 9:13).

Let me support from linguistics Preus's important differentiation, then underscore its importance to the gospel and apply it to hermeneutics and the teaching of theology. As the first sentence in the preceding paragraph illustrates, English discriminates "factual" knowledge from "relationship" knowledge by using a particle such as "that" or "about" with verbs of knowing for the former notion and omitting such for the latter. Hebrew makes a similar distinction by the particle *ki*.<sup>1</sup> For example, the Lord says to Cyrus, "I will give you . . . riches stored in secret places, so that you may know *that* [*teda ki*] I am the LORD" (Isa. 45:3), and then adds, "though you do not know *me* [*yedantani*]" (italics mine). Some professing Evangelicals think they are Christians because they know that Jesus is Lord, but they do not know the Lord Jesus. James cautioned: "You believe that [*su pisteueis hoti*] there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19).

How does this distinction relate to hermeneutics and the teaching of theology? Immanuel Kant, it will be recalled, differentiated the way of knowing personal objects (that is, those possessing volition) from impersonal ones (that is, those lacking volition). For knowing the latter, he used the German word *Erklaerung*; for the former, he used *Verstehen*. He cogently argued that we "explain" impersonal objects, but we "know" personal objects. For the former the scientific method is appropriate; for the latter it is inappropriate. To understand objects that lack volition one distances oneself from them and attempts to be detached and as dispassionate as possible. On the other hand, to know a person one must commit oneself to her or him. The scientific method is appropriate for the text of Scripture and for systematic theology but inappropriate for the principal aim of Christian understanding of Scripture, the knowledge of God.

One time I was asked to teach a course on the Psalms at a state university. As I reflected on my assignment I contemplated how I could communicate the Psalter's highly devotional content to students schooled in the scientific method. In the first lecture I introduced the course by noting Kant's distinction. To get my point across, I asked one of the students to stand in a corner of the room. While the student stood there the class observed him, analyzed him, and systematically classified their information without talking to him or allowing him to talk to them. The point became quickly apparent to the students that by their method they had actually positioned themselves not to know their classmate. I drew the obvious conclusion that were I to teach the Psalms without commitment to God, the class could never understand the object of their content.

In contrast to "modern existential theology and neoorthodoxy," however, Preus adroitly does not pit the personal knowledge of God against revealed facts and information about God and what he has done (pp. 1-3). I applaud his balanced discussion. He overexaggerates the point, however, when he says, "The basic theme of the Old Testament is that one knows God only when one recognizes his redemptive activity" (p. 2). No contemporary biblical theologian of whom I am aware supports this theme as the center of biblical theology.<sup>2</sup>

Preus follows this discussion about epistemology with the sources of information about God and presents the position of the Reformers that God revealed himself in creation and in Scripture (pp. 2-4). Although the presentation is orthodox, it fails to satisfy the aim of this summit, "the application of Scripture to contemporary issues." For many thoughtful people Darwin's theory that organic structures developed from much simpler organisms by purely natural processes, and the biochemical possibility that life originated from lifeless matter undermines Paley's evidence for

God in creation and/or modifies man's understanding of God. The problems of evil, suffering, and frustration also affect the cogency of the Scriptures cited by Preus. Logicians argue that all cases of design are not necessarily due to one and the same designer. Even if there is only one designer, nothing is done to show that this being is predominantly good rather than evil, infinitely powerful or wise rather than limited in these qualities. A one-sentence shot at process theologians (p. 2) is no substitute for serious interaction with them.<sup>3</sup>

Preus once again returns to the subject of epistemology and argues that man cannot know God by assuming the posture of autonomous knower and God as the object to be known. Instead, he rightly argues that God, as subject, makes himself known to man, the object. He condemns modern man's hubris to speculate about God rather than to turn to Scripture for a revelation from him, more specifically God's revelation of himself in the gospel of Jesus Christ as mediated through the Word of Scripture (pp. 3–6). He "applies" this scriptural position by accusing neoorthodoxy and modern logical positivism of denying this doctrine.

Calling a spade a spade, however, does not effectively apply Scripture to contemporary theological issues. Our writer excuses himself from meaningful debate, saying, "We haven't time to refute these two ideologies. . . ." Let me supplement Preus here by reminding the reader of Carl F. H. Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority*, who, in a number of brilliant essays such as "The Ways of Knowing," "The Rise and Fall of Logical Positivism," "Empirical Verification and Christian Theism," does refute Neo-Protestantism and logical positivism.

Preus helpfully turns man back to Scripture and its gospel as the means of knowing God, but he stops too soon by failing to capitalize on his insight that the Cartesian way of knowing cannot lead to the knowledge of God even by means of Scripture. As God is not in our power, so also Scripture is not in our grasp. God is hidden in Scripture; the Spirit reveals truth to the childlike. Jesus Christ said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matt. 11:25). David Steinmetz in a brilliant essay, "Hermeneutic and Old Testament Interpretation in Staupitz and the Young Martin Luther," summarized Luther's practical insights that flow from the truth that God is hidden in Scripture.

Scripture is not at the disposal of our intellect and is not obliged to render up its secrets to those who have theological training, merely because they are learned. Scripture imposes its own meaning; it binds the soul to God through faith. Because the initiative in the interpretation of Scripture remains in the hands of God, we must humble ourselves in His presence and pray

that He will give understanding and wisdom to us as we meditate on the sacred text. While we may take courage from the thought that God gives understanding of Scripture to the humble, we should also heed the warning that the truth of God can never coexist with human pride. Humility is the hermeneutical precondition for authentic exegesis.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

Our author notes in the first place that God is living and active (pp. 6–7) with the correlative truths that he is personal (pp. 7–8), and graciously, evangelically present among us (vv. 11–12). He pastorally applies these truths: "He knows perfectly our weaknesses, our needs, the secrets of our hearts (Ps. 44:21). . . . No groaning is hidden from him (Ps. 38:9)" (p. 8). The discussion, however, focuses on what Scripture says, not on contemporary issues. Secular man believes that he lives in a closed universe and correlatively that his salvation lies in manipulating its laws to his advantage. Contemporary man wants to know how prayer, whose power seems less than verifiable, relates to technology, whose successes are all too apparent. Also, does not the fact that God is the Author and Sustainer of life have something to say about the current issue of abortion? In addition, does not the fact that he is living and eternal have something to say about man's not avenging himself but living by faith that in the future God will avenge wrongs (cf. Deut. 32:40–41)?

Preus now affirms that God is a unity (p. 9). He rests his case on Deuteronomy 6:4. (The other passages he cites teach that God is unique, not that he is undivided essence). His text, however, is less than convincing, for the Hebrew word *ehad*, traditionally translated "one," can also mean "alone," "unique" as in Song of Songs 6:9; Zechariah 14:9. Its cognates in Ugaritic and Akkadian also have this meaning. In fact, the Jewish interpreters before the third century A.D. did not understand *ehad* as "oneness."<sup>5</sup> The most recent translation of the Jewish Publication Society, *The Torah* (1962) returns to this ancient understanding, rendering "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

Preus makes the helpful application from Deuteronomy 6:5 that "this oneness of God demands that we worship him." The relevance of this truth to materialism, which corrupts our entire society, should not be taken for granted, however.

Preus now turns his attention to monotheism (pp. 9–10). Here he underestimates the biblical data for the existence of other gods when he says, "There is no suggestion anywhere in Scripture of gods besides the one true God." Most modern commentators have taken passages such as Exodus 20:3; 22:20; 1 Samuel 26:19 as indications of an earlier stage of henotheism

(the worship of one god without denying the existence of others) in the Israelite religion. Would it not be better to address these texts and note that they reflect not survival from earlier times but tacit recognition of religious practices and that theological statements such as Deuteronomy 4:35, 39 and 32:39 reflect the theological thought of God's elect community?

Preus draws this section to a conclusion by a succinct, enlightening summary of God's attributes (pp. 10–11). He does amazingly well in presenting these in the light of the breadth of subjects he has chosen to address. Nevertheless, a most important attribute, scarcely touched upon, is God's faithfulness [Hebrew *hesed*]. K. D. Sakenfeld has shown the relevance of this attribute; against self-actualization that ends in isolation and loneliness Sakenfeld shows ways in which serious, enduring, and life-giving interpersonal relationships may be produced.<sup>6</sup> Preus also mentions God's freedom but fails to drive home his elective purposes. God's role as creator is not distinct from his role as Lord of history, for both creation and history alike are expressions of his one will. Even false religions are taken up in the world plan of God (Deut. 4:19; 29:26; cf. 10:17).

### III. WHO IS GOD?

In his concluding section, Preus defends the doctrine of the Trinity by scriptural citations (pp. 11–16). Here we reach the high-water mark of the paper. He again applies the doctrine by naming many sorts of theologians who have lost God by denying it (p. 15). I find it difficult to interact or add to this animated, dogmatic, sweeping discussion. At times Preus prooftexts the position (e.g., Ps. 2:7), at other times, he fails to cite texts. If I understand him correctly, he argues that throughout the history of doctrine when theologians deny this doctrine they lose God (pp. 14–15). Recently, however, Charles Hummel reminded us that Isaac Newton became "convinced that a massive fraud had perverted the legacy of the Church and certain Scripture" and "adopted the Arian position. . . . During his lifetime, however, nobody cast aspersions on Newton's Anglican orthodoxy."<sup>7</sup> For the church fathers and for me the doctrine of the Trinity is of utmost practical importance. If Jesus Christ is not God, then he condemns men and cannot save them. If he achieved perfection as merely an earthly man, then by his moral achievement he only convicts the rest of mankind for their failure and cannot come to them as a heavenly Savior.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See now Anneli Aejmelaesus, "Function and Interpretation of KI in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/2 (1986): 193-209, esp. pp. 109-10.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Samuel Terrien, "Biblical Theology: The Old Testament (1970-1984). A Decade and a Half of Spectacular Growth," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15/4 (October 1985): 127-35.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. R. Gillies, "A Little Known American," *Expository Times* 97/11 (1986): 323-28.

<sup>4</sup>David Steinmetz, "Hermeneutic and Old Testament Interpretation in Staupitz and the Young Martin Luther," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte* 70 (1979): 41-42.

<sup>5</sup>J. McBride, "The Yoke of the Kingdom," *Interpretation* 27 (July 1973): 243-306.

<sup>6</sup>Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), p. 144.